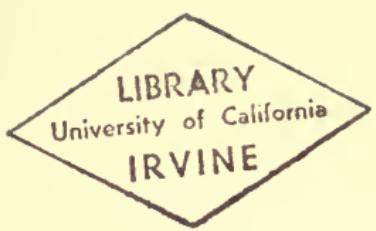


COUNCILS OF ACROESUS

MARY KNIGHT POTTER



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COUNCILS OF CRÆSUS

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LAURA LORRAINE

COUNCILS OF CRÆSUS

By
Mary Knight Potter

Author of
“Love in Art,” “The Art of the Vatican,” etc.

Illustrated by
W. H. Dunton



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COUNCILS OF CRÆSUS

CHAPTER I.

MISS ASPINWALL stood in the middle of Mrs. Lorraine's long drawing-room, surveying it with unqualified disapproval.

“Taste,” she murmured, “is akin to greatness. A few are born with it; a few more make desperate attempts and acquire a sufficient amount for parade; but the vast majority have their entire stock thrust upon them by their dress-makers and upholsterers. Here,” she swept a withering glance about, “one might suppose a circus manager and a pawnbroker to be the only ones responsible for such an agglomeration.”

There was no doubt that it was an amazing apartment. It merited the dis-

tinction of being “one of a kind” even in Greater New York. In spite of Miss Aspinwall’s strictures, it could truthfully be said to show great catholicity of taste. There were some wonderful old tapestries on the walls used as backgrounds for sporting prints; an elaborate jinrikisha made into a cabinet was wheeled against a Marie Antoinette inlaid and painted piano; a George Inness and a famous Daubigny hung over a farcical Eastern god; low shelves across one end, filled with first folios and rare sixteenth century editions, were half covered up by a huge circular glass case within which was a stuffed monkey. This was placed so that it was the first thing one saw on entering. Standing there with a ridiculous soldier’s cap on its grinning head and a big drum slung about its neck, it seemed about to herald every one’s approach with a double tattoo. Privately Miss Aspinwall half believed that the late Mr. Lorraine’s spirit sometimes took possession of this his pet monkey, and she often had an uneasy feeling that the glassy eyes were turned to her

with a very much alive sardonic glare. Eastern embroideries, Indian trophies, and Empire silver, everything and anything crowded themselves into every available space all over the room.

“Harriet Aspinwall,” came a voice just then, with a slight drawl in its clear tones, “are you talking to the furniture?”

“No,” said Miss Aspinwall, shortly, turning to shake hands with her hostess, “not to it, but of it. For Heaven’s sake, Helen, why don’t you get rid of this stuff and give the room a chance to breathe,—not to mention the people who have to come into it?”

“Most of these latter,” agreed Mrs. Lorraine, cheerfully, “certainly aren’t worth mentioning. What’s the matter with the room, Harriet?” She sank into a puffed-up armchair of lavender and gold, and looked at her visitor with a subdued sparkle in her blue eyes.

Miss Aspinwall sat down on the edge of a three-cornered teakwood affair, and slowly undid her big gray feather boa, while she studied the woman opposite. It

is never safe to say that any individual is the most beautiful woman in New York. There is always another, at the very next corner, likely enough, with good right to dispute the title. Miss Aspinwall had better reasons than most for knowing this. Yet now, as so often before when looking at Helen Lorraine, she thought it with full conviction. What she said, however, was quite different.

"Matter with the room!" she scolded. "Just because you flatter yourself that it is of no consequence what kind of a background you have, is it any reason for inflicting such a medley as this on the public?"

"But the public doesn't come here," drawled Mrs. Lorraine, much amused.

"All of it does that can get a card by hook or crook," retorted Miss Aspinwall, "and those who can't, read about it in the society columns of the Sunday paper. The pernicious influence of a room like this," she swept her arm about dramatically, "is beyond calculation."

"Dear me!" Mrs. Lorraine opened her

eyes in horror. “Are you getting ready to go on the stump, Harriet?”

Miss Aspinwall suddenly collapsed. A certain society journal had once spoken of her as “that strong-minded rough-rider over the conventions of her class,” and she had never quite got over it.

“Helen,” she said, weakly, “I give in. Only,” she shook her head reproachfully at her friend, “I really can’t understand it. You always professed to hate this bric-à-brac shop when Dick was alive. And yet now, two years after his death, there’s not a thing changed.”

Mrs. Lorraine’s light amusement had faded from her face. She looked at Miss Aspinwall almost pleadingly. “But two years are a very short time,” she said.

The other woman observed her curiously. “I never did understand you, Helen. I am not likely to begin now.”

“Oh!” The young widow threw up her head with a quick gasp. Then, suddenly, without a word of warning, she dropped on the floor beside Miss Aspinwall. “Harriet,” she scarcely whis-

pered, “can’t you see? Two years of freedom after seventeen with him! Isn’t that very short? I have hardly come to realise it yet! That’s the reason I keep these rooms this way. They are so full of *him!* Every day I look about and say to myself, ‘He isn’t here! He can’t come back! He who polluted everything within his reach can never ruin anything for me again.’ I *had* to keep saying it over to make myself sure of it. For months after he died I had a deadly terror that somehow it was all a dream, — that he wasn’t dead. I used to shudder at each heavy step. It seemed as if he must come back. Even if he were dead, I almost believed the devil couldn’t keep him until he had come to drag me with him. I believe, Harriet, that the only thing that kept me sane those months, was these rooms. The knowledge that any day I could scrape this whole place clean, was what proved my real freedom. I don’t know if you can understand it, but I seemed to need this actual, haunting sign of his presence to make me sure that he was gone for ever.”

"My poor dear!" There were very few people who had ever seen the expression that was on Harriet Aspinwall's face. Almost as few as would have recognised the clinging figure within her arms as Helen Lorraine. "My poor dear! Was it so bad as that? Even I didn't suspect it was quite so frightful. For the sake of old times, Helen, in memory at least of that one time fifteen years ago, you might have let me try to help you."

"What could you do? What could any one do?" There was only great apathy in the low voice.

"Do!" Miss Aspinwall regained some of her habitual decisiveness. "Help you to get a divorce, of course, years ago. I can't understand why you didn't."

Mrs. Lorraine sat up straight, undisguised horror in her face. "And have my degradation hooted about the streets as common property? Have every man and woman I met looking at me with mingled pity and disgust that a woman could stand what I did and yet live? I tell you I used sometimes to think I must

be common and hard myself or I *should* have died. No, no! Even he understood me better than that. He knew well enough I'd never go to the courts for reparation." She laughed bitterly, and attempted to rise.

Miss Aspinwall's arms held her back. "Keep still, Helen. We don't often indulge in such excesses. It's fifteen years, on my part. I'd most forgotten we originally were something besides automatons. I suppose," she went on, musingly, "I might have realised the whole thing. You were just that way as a girl. You always had the strongest will of any of us. I almost never knew you to fail in anything you undertook. But if you did, it was simply because you couldn't succeed without a fuss. And a fuss you hated worse even than failure. Then, if by any chance you didn't get what you wanted, no one knew that, either. They thought you'd simply changed your mind and preferred what came. It is no wonder that though I knew your great show of content was outrageous sham, yet even I didn't guess

how bad things were.” She held her friend still closer, and kissed her remorsefully.

“ I’m glad you didn’t. I couldn’t have stood one bit more sympathy than you gave. I had *got* to keep every rag of pretence about me that I could find, or I should have been stark naked before a gaping world.” She shuddered and then wrenched herself free, and stood tall and stately, her golden head high, a disdainfully amused smile on her lips. “ What did you say about being automatons, Harriet? We’re forgetting we are only cogs and wheels and sawdust.”

“ Which,” rejoined Miss Aspinwall, “ is a dangerous state. If one got into the way of forgetting, it would be worse than the morphine habit. The Spartans,” she went on, with asperity, “ have always had too much credit for their toughening system. Modern society has receipts for callousness that those old heathens never thought of formulating.”

“ A very good thing, too, for society,” said Mrs. Lorraine. “ There are few

enough barricades between me and my neighbours' woes, as it is."

"Neighbours!" sniffed Miss Aspinwall. "We don't have neighbours any more. They disappeared when apartment houses began huddling forty families under one roof. Which reminds me of my errand here. I'm going to be at the Oakes for awhile longer. Weather's too glorious to be cooped up in these prison streets yet awhile. Won't you and Laura come down Monday for a few days?"

"Awfully sorry, but the fact is," Mrs. Lorraine coloured a trifle, "I've ordered the men for next week to pull these rooms to pieces. I've got to be on hand, to be sure" — she hesitated a moment — "to be sure the result won't even suggest them as they are now. And if things are not hurried up they may not be ready for Laura's *début*."

Miss Aspinwall said, "Thank the Lord," under her breath, and shot a look of triumph at the stuffed monkey. "Let Laura come without you," was what she said aloud.

"I don't know," Mrs. Lorraine replied, doubtfully. "Whom are you to have there? Some of your disreputable artist hangers-on or Tom Dinsmore's sporting set? I don't care about Laura's coming into such close contact with either, when I'm not 'round."

Miss Aspinwall laughed without resentment. "Tom's to be there. But I stipulated that he was to come alone. And, unfortunately for me, none of my 'artist hangers-on' are invited, either. They are all quite as conventional a crowd as you could desire even for Laura." She bowed mockingly. "Mr. and Mrs. Tileston and Amy; Arthur Upton and his sister Jeannette; he'll take care of Amy; and then I've asked Frank Barrett because he's head over heels in love with Jeannette, and the Uptons want her to see enough of him to get used to the idea. That's all, except of course Aunt Harmon, and except also," she looked at Helen out of the corner of her eye, "Sir Robert Martinmas."

"Sir Robert Martinmas!" Mrs. Lor-

raine turned quickly. " You mean the Sir Robert whom we met at the Duns-combes in London? The Englishman who has too much money to be looking for an American wife? "

" And who is quite without a questionable past? And who really has brains to back up his money? And who's been dangled for by every enterprising mamma in English society for the last ten years? Quite so, Mrs. Lorraine. Don't you think Laura had better go, or would you like to be there yourself without her? " Miss Aspinwall positively winked at her hostess.

" Don't be vulgar, Harriet. What has he come over for, and how long is he going to stay? "

" Undoubtedly he would have confided all his reasons to my sympathising self, " said Miss Aspinwall, airily, " but Margaret Taft seemed to think it unsafe to leave us alone for longer than fifteen minutes; and by that time we hadn't got far. He'd only told me that he was delighted to be here and to see so many

American friends, and that he was after data for his book on the future of the negro, and that he expected to stay for four or five months, mostly in New York, and he'd be delighted to come to the Oakes, and somehow, in spite of my independence, I always made him think of an Englishwoman. That was about all," she finished, solemnly.

"Really?" Mrs. Lorraine studied Harriet in open scorn. "I can't understand how you extracted so little in fifteen minutes."

"Extracted? My dear girl, I didn't have to extract. He was fairly brimming over in his hurry to pour out his facts. And there was one thing more. He inquired most ponderously for you and Laura, and announced his intention of honouring New York with most of his presence only after he found out you were to be here this winter. I can positively affirm that those heavy lids of his actually lifted a quarter of an inch when he made the statement." Miss Aspinwall did not try to hide her glee.

“If,” said Mrs. Lorraine, with biting emphasis, “if you would give up painting dowagers and infants, and devote your talents to lurid journalism, you wouldn’t have a rival in the field.”

“I have often thought,” nodded Miss Aspinwall, “that I might have reached heights in literature beyond my possibilities with the brush.”

“You reach heights in insolence, at least,” retorted Mrs. Lorraine. “You are not at all a proper person to chaperone Laura. I ought not to let her go, of course. But if your aunt is to be there, — and —”

“And Sir Robert Martinmas,” murmured Miss Aspinwall.

“And if,” went on Mrs. Lorraine, undisturbed, “you will promise to look after the child as I should,—why, if she’d like to go,—it will be so dull for her here with all this tearing up, that—”

“I’ll expect her on the three o’clock train Monday,” finished Miss Aspinwall. “And I’ll do my best to take your place and gently guide Sir Robert’s feet into

the path awaiting him." With which, before her friend could make any further exceptions, she was out of the hall and into her carriage.

Mrs. Lorraine walked to the window and watched the disappearing brougham. "Harriet," she thought, with some irritation, "is a little trying at times." As she turned from the window a tall, slight girl came up the steps, and a moment later Laura Lorraine stood at the drawing-room door smiling placidly at her mother. That lady looked at her admiringly, and then she frowned ever so slightly.

"I never can get used to seeing you grown up, Laura. What did you do it for, so soon?"

The girl laughed softly and pulled her mother into the big lavender chair, while she knelt beside her. "It's a shame, mother. You oughtn't to have a daughter one bit older than ten instead of eighteen. I wish I were ten, too," she added, wistfully. "It's awfully stupid, being grown up."

"If you only wouldn't think so you'd

look about ten years younger," answered Mrs. Lorraine, reproachfully. "With your forehead wrinkled up like that you might be twenty-eight instead of eighteen. And then," gazing down at her with a comical smile of dismay, "how old will they call me?"

Laura kneaded her forehead with her gloved finger tips conscientiously, and looked more serious than ever.

Mrs. Lorraine examined the gentle, grave face with its deep gray eyes in some perplexity, and then she broke into a light laugh. "Never mind, baby, you'll think differently before the end of the season. I've something nice to tell you this very minute. You're invited to the Oakes for a week."

Laura's eyes brightened. "At Aunt Harriet's? How lovely! When do we go?"

"*We* aren't going. It's only you. It will be a sort of trial dose of freedom for you before you bow to Mrs. Grundy."

The girl's face was wholly sober again. "I sha'n't know what to do without you.

I'll never be sure whether to say yes or no. You've always decided everything for me, mother."

Mrs. Lorraine patted the flushed cheek.
" And I shall probably continue to decide when it's anything important, goosie. Now, though, you need just such a chance to get a little independence into that obedient head of yours."

Laura sighed abjectly, and then an unexpected twinkle came into her big eyes.
" If I get too much, mother, maybe you won't like it!"

CHAPTER II.

MONDAY afternoon, just as Laura was ready to drive to the station, Mrs. Lorraine received the following characteristic telegram from Miss Aspinwall: “The lasso didn’t hold, after all. Prey escaped at the last minute. Have invited Weathersby instead. Considered him harmless.”

Mrs. Lorraine frowned and then laughed. Perhaps it was just as well. She really knew very little about Sir Robert Martinmas. It was better for Laura to meet him under her own guidance. As for Weathersby — well, Harriet had shown sense for once. There was nothing about Harriet’s elderly Uncle John Weathersby to make her uneasy.

Laura herself was much pleased with the change. “Uncle John” was an old friend, and she was immensely relieved that the Englishman, whom she privately

considered rather a bore, was not to be there.

When the train puffed alongside the mimic Swiss chalet station at Coggeshall, Miss Aspinwall was there in her dog-cart, skilfully soothing a nervous pair of bays.

"How do," she called, gaily, to Laura. "Give your checks to Michael, and jump in quick."

As the girl got up beside her, the pair sprang into the road at the right almost at a bound.

"If these animals were such fools about anything but trains and engines, I'd get rid of them to-morrow. There, there, Patsy," she said, reassuringly, to the off horse, whose flanks were still shaking, and whose eyes were red with fright, "we sha'n't see another train to-day. Behave yourself." The parting shriek of the engine almost put Patsy into a spasm.

At last, having succeeded in quieting them into a steady, smooth gait, she leaned over and gave Laura a light kiss. "You're looking amazingly well, my

dear," she said; " this air has turned your cheeks into summer roses. It's a great pity Sir Robert isn't to be here to see." She gazed quizzically at the lovely face with its fine mouth and chin.

" Now, Aunt Harriet," Laura nestled closer beside her, " you know it isn't a pity at all. He nearly scared me to pieces in London, and I'm sure he'd never think of me except as an utter infant. Uncle John is much better. We have beautiful times together. He's nice and jolly and does everything I ask him to. He's so old, you see, that he doesn't have to pretend to be young,— which is more than Sir Robert has sense for."

" Both gentlemen," said Miss Aspinwall, smiling widely, " would be highly delighted at your discrimination. Poor Uncle John, who flatters himself that his sixty-five years are no more than two score and ten! As for Sir Robert! Child alive! He's only your mother's age."

" Then he is quite old enough to be my father," answered Laura, coolly, " and any

way, he's too old to be collecting postage stamps and birds' eggs."

"My dear!" Miss Aspinwall chuckled openly. "He has a stamp collection worth thousands, and he's one of England's noted ornithologists."

"Then I am sure he's really older than Uncle John," said Laura. "What amusement could he find with me, do you suppose? I'm not a stamp nor a bird."

"I don't know," Miss Aspinwall laughed. "Sir Robert might think you were a very sweet little birdie, indeed! He'd have very bad taste if he didn't."

"Aunt Harriet!" The girl sat up very stiff and held her proud young head high. "Just because I'm eighteen and have got to be pushed out into society so soon, is that any reason why every man I meet should be thought of as a husband for me? If I were a man," she added, with deep indignation, "I'd never go near a girl till she'd been out so long that both she and her relatives had stopped trying to bait every eligible party." Her young voice rang out clear and defiant. "I feel

like telling any new man I meet that he needn't worry, *I'm* not trying to capture him. On the contrary, I'll be only too glad if he'll let me alone."

"My, my, Laura!" Miss Aspinwall's tone mocked, but there was a very different gleam in her smiling eyes. "Don't say those things so loud. There might be a man right in those trees." She waved her whip toward the shivering white birches bunched together along the roadside. "You mustn't run such risks — before your career has even begun! You know you don't mean it, either. Just suppose you should be left to flourish alone, till you were a shrivelled-up old maid like me!"

Laura laughed, and looked at her "Aunt" Harriet with boundless admiration. "You shrivelled up and old! You're younger than mother, and you are about as shrivelled up as — as —" Here a turn of the road brought them dangerously close to the track again, and the distant toot of a locomotive sent Patsy into a dance on his hind legs. "Just

about as shrivelled up as Patsy here," continued Laura, when she could get her breath. "Moreover," she gave a sidelong glance at the alert, well-poised figure beside her, "moreover, you don't need to be an old maid a minute longer than you want to!"

"Mercy, child!" Miss Aspinwall lifted her eyebrows. "I haven't heard so many compliments since I was twenty."

Just at this point, with a sudden sharp turn, she wheeled the pair through a big iron and brick gateway.

"Oh," cried Laura, in delight, "how fascinating!"

They had rolled into a roadway that wound itself into the very heart of a thick pine grove. Tall, straight, and slender, the trunks stretched up till they vanished among the high, feather-laden branches that formed a tremulous, palpitating roof above their heads. The wind, soughing through the canopy of soft long needles, made ever changing cracks through which the sun shone in splintering rays up and down the trunks, till their bare, lower

branches fairly pricked the surrounding gloom with sharp, scintillating points of light. The air was full of floating, golden needles that, soft as snowflakes, seemed merely breathing themselves down, down on to the red-cushioned ground beneath. Suddenly, through the mazes of the trunks, a streak of vivid blue flashed in and out. Then, almost with no further warning, the little forest came to an end in a wide, rocky, weed-grown field. Here the greens had changed from gold and reds to soft silver shades that still showed warmer glints in a trailing red-leaved blackberry vine or half-dried goldenrod. And there, beyond, was the deep blue of the Sound, cutting its own horizon line against the grayer sky. One's eyes instinctively went straight to this boundary, so that the long, rambling house slightly at the left, and half-way between the grove and the sea, was at first unobserved.

"I planned it that way on purpose," explained Miss Aspinwall, showing the pleasure of a planner at having her intents appreciated. "If you saw it the moment

you got out of the woods, you'd never half look at it because of the Sound behind. It stands some chance now that you don't notice it till you've had your first paroxysm over Father Ocean."

The house was built of rough gray stone. Its long, low central part terminated at one end in a rather heavy two-storied, irregularly angled pile, and at the other became a jumble of turrets and balconies about a big, mediæval-looking tower.

"The others aren't coming till tonight," said Miss Aspinwall, leading the way into the big raftered hall, where at one side gay flames were dancing among the shadows of a huge brick fireplace. "Consequently, when you've made a dutiful call on Aunt Harmon, you and I can have the afternoon together."

Aunt Harmon was a little old lady who had lived with her niece Harriet for nearly fifteen years. Because of the way this came about, Miss Aspinwall had a deep gratitude and affection for her. Besides, the little body, always clad in heavy black

satin that fell about her in straight full folds, was extremely useful. She made a most excellent chaperone, and she always backed up everything Miss Aspinwall said or did with instant and unchangeable approbation. There were those who said that such fulsome acquiescence was the only peaceable way of getting along with Miss Aspinwall. Others, however, claimed that Aunt Harmon's idolatry was responsible for many of her niece's peculiarities.

Mrs. Harmon greeted Laura effusively. "You've grown twice as pretty as your pretty self since the last trip abroad, my dear. I'm delighted we are to see a bit of you before you get so hedged about with admirers that old friends will have no chance at all."

"Oh, dear!" sighed Laura to herself, "I wish they wouldn't." And she escaped to Miss Aspinwall in the studio at the top of the tower. Her hostess, swaddled in a voluminous blue apron, was busily squeezing out paint on to a huge curving palette.

"Come right in," she said, as Laura stood looking at what Miss Aspinwall called her implements of torture. "It's a shame to impose on you, but really, you've got to let me make a dab at you. In that hat you are altogether too fetching to lose. It'll only take an hour," she added, catching a fleeting look of regret that the girl threw out of the window.

"You see," she went on, after a few minutes spent in putting Laura into a tall, carved chair, and hanging a strip of warm gray velour behind her, "you see, within six months there may not be any of this present Laura Lorraine left. And your mother might like a chance to compare you then with yourself now."

"There it is again," said Laura, petulantly. "Why is everything to be so different? Why am I suddenly to change so completely? Just because I may go to more dinners and dances and meet more people, why does that alter everything?"

"The reason is," said Miss Aspinwall, slapping on the background with big free strokes, "that now you are on the market.

Which means that there is a price upon your head. And you know very well that a person under such conditions cannot be regarded in the same light as a free man."

The colour deepened and flooded Laura's cheeks and forehead, and then receded and left her piteously pale.

"Goodness, child!" exclaimed Miss Aspinwall, in a businesslike way. "If you're going to undergo such lightning changes as that, just give me warning."

Laura had no smile for the sally. "Say you didn't mean it," she begged, very low. "Say I'm not for sale."

Miss Aspinwall stepped off a few feet and looked at her canvas with tipped head and squinting eyes.

"My dear," her tone was elaborately indifferent, "we're all for sale, more or less. It's only the freshness of the article that we notice in a *débutante*."

"But I'm not," repeated Laura, "I'm not for sale."

Miss Aspinwall's eyes were compassionate, but her voice was as cool and unconcerned as at first. "Not for mere money,



"WE'RE ALL FOR SALE, MORE OR LESS"

child, of course. It will take more than that to buy your mother's claim on you."

"Mother!" Laura's face cleared. "She'd *never* make me marry any one I didn't want to."

"But you most certainly would want to marry the irreproachable individual she sanctions," laughed Miss Aspinwall.

"Perhaps I mightn't, either," said Laura, with a hint of stubbornness.

"Then, my dear," the painter drew the soft red mouth with one sure, careful stroke, "then you must be able to do battle for your opinion. Did you ever get your own way when your mother had a different way for you?" she asked, with a wicked twinkle. She knew perfectly well that Mrs. Lorraine's word was law and gospel to her daughter. As the girl flushed and looked down, she felt something of compunction. "I never did, any way," she interjected, quietly. "The only consolation is, that, as a rule, your mother's way is rather better than my own."

But Laura hardly noticed her. She

was staring straight ahead, as if suddenly she saw beyond the present. "I couldn't battle with mother, no matter what it was. I should have to do as she said."

Miss Aspinwall shivered. She felt as if a ghost laid low fifteen years ago had touched her with its clammy hand. "Any one," she said, tensely, "can fight, must fight, when her whole life is threatened with destruction." Then she shook herself impatiently. "Gracious, child! What nonsense! There! I won't keep you prisoner a minute longer. Let's explore the Cove before it gets too dark and cool." She tore off her apron, turned the canvas face against the wall, and grabbing Laura by the waist, waltzed her down the room out of the hall on to the stairs, till her uneasy, haunted look had wholly vanished.

There was nothing to make it come back during the rest of the days at the Oakes, though several things happened very differently from what Miss Aspinwall had planned, or Mrs. Lorraine had sanctioned. In the first place, neither

Mr. Weathersby nor Mr. Dinsmore came on the evening train with the others. More unfortunately still, Miss Aspinwall received word from her lawyers urging her presence in the city the next morning. As it was in relation to a law suit that had been her pet hobby for two years, and was now nearing a triumphant finish, she felt that she must go. This was one of the times when Aunt Harmon's usefulness shone resplendent. Miss Aspinwall vowed it was a trick of fate on purpose to show Aunt Harmon's superiority as a hostess. To the lady herself she said, "All you need, Tante, is to let each one do as he or she wishes."

Now, she ought to have known that for Aunt Harmon, who always followed her instructions to the letter, this was dangerous counsel. Miss Aspinwall had hardly departed before a telegram came from Mr. Weathersby. "Arrive to-day three; bringing young Wilton. Wire if inconvenient."

"Of course," said hospitable Aunt Harmon, as she read it aloud, "it's per-

fectly convenient, and Harriet would want John to do as he pleased. But I don't know who 'Young Wilton' is."

"I guess nobody else does, either," said Mrs. Tileston, who was curled up on the settle by the fireplace. "He's a young architect from Heaven knows what backwoods. For some inscrutable reason he seems to get invited most everywhere." To do Mrs. Tileston justice, her unpleasant tone was caused more by certain feelings of present discomfort than by any animus against the youth under discussion. The seashore, to her mind, was a distinctly uncomfortable place at this season of the year. She came only because her husband wanted the shooting, and because she herself hoped that the several days' close companionship would induce Arthur Upton to propose to Amy.

It was Amy who replied to her mother's objection. "Mr. Van Breen told me that Mr. Wilton brought extremely complimentary letters of introduction from influential people abroad. They say he was

making a name for himself in London before he entered the Griswold firm here."

"He's a mighty good fellow, too," put in Arthur Upton, who was showing Amy how to clean a gun.

Mrs. Tileston looked cross. It would have pleased her better if Arthur had not agreed so amiably with Amy's approval of another man. "Letters of introduction count for very little," she said, coldly. "He certainly is of no family or we should know it. And just as certainly he has no money behind him, either."

"At least he is well-bred, well-educated, good-looking, and with friends among the best people," retorted Amy. She and her mother never thought alike upon any known subject, unless it was in their estimate of Arthur Upton. Even there Mrs. Tileston felt unsure of her.

"Moreover," added Upton, who seemed bent on increasing the elder woman's discomfort, "he's a good shot, a first-rate horseman, and with nothing of the cad about him." He looked at Amy as he

said it, and there was an answering gleam in her hazel eyes.

Mrs. Tileston pursed up her lips and concluded wisdom lay in silence.

A few hours later the subject of these remarks was being hustled by Mr. Weathersby into the Pullman express for Coggeshall. Mr. Weathersby always “hustled” when he had anything to do with trains, and it wasn’t till they were fairly seated that the young man had a chance for a word.

“I only hope,” he ventured at last, “that Miss Aspinwall won’t consider me a rank intruder.”

“Intruder!” snorted Mr. Weathersby. “You’re my guest, aren’t you? I guess I wasn’t going down to that God-forsaken place with no one to go shooting with but that fool of a Tileston. Besides, you needn’t worry! Harriet never refused a chance to have another man around!”

CHAPTER III.

I T was the day after, and Miss Aspinwall was still detained in town. Mr. Weathersby, Mr. Tileston, and Jack Wilton were out after rabbits, and the four young people had driven into the village, ostensibly for marshmallows for a roast. Laura, who politely declined to be an unwelcome fifth, had a dim idea that their chief purpose might be to escape the espionage of Mrs. Tileston. Nothing would have induced that lady to drive out in one of Miss Aspinwall's open country wagons at that season of the year.

Somewhat disconsolately Laura watched her sitting huddled over the fire and a French novel.

“Last year at this time,” she thought, with reminiscent envy, “I was with dear Madame Réné in Paris. And if there weren’t lessons, there were hundreds of interesting things to do. And the year

before there was Frau von Hagen in Dresden. Oh, dear! it's stupid to be grown up." She drummed on the window-pane forlornly, and looked out on to the wide stretch of beach below. Suddenly her eyes brightened.

"Prince! Prince!" she called, throwing up the sash and whistling sharply.

"My dear child!" Mrs. Tileston's teeth fairly chattered. "Do you want to turn me into an iceberg?"

Laura shut the window hastily. "Excuse me," she said, good-naturedly, "I haven't seen Aunt Harriet's Prince since I got home from abroad. And he remembers me," she added, gleefully. "I'm going right out to have a run with him."

"Prince," repeated Mrs. Tileston, vacuously, "oh, you mean Harriet's bull terrier. Ugly little beast! I suppose she called him Prince because he's such a hideous brute." With which dismissal of the subject she returned to her book and fire.

Laura wondered, as she pulled on her coat, if Amy at middle age would be like

her mother. She had a vague feeling of pity for Mr. Upton.

Once on the sand with Prince, who welcomed her with excruciating barks and overpowering capers, she forgot all her homesickness and dissatisfaction. A dog was the one creature who could make Laura romp. Mrs. Lorraine often said in despair that the only way she ever realised that Laura was not over forty years old was to watch her with these pets. No matter where they travelled they always took with them from one to three dogs.

"They are an awful trouble and no end of expense," she had acknowledged to Harriet Aspinwall, "but they help me to feel that I don't have to be sixty to be that child's mother."

Miss Aspinwall never quite agreed with her friend on the subject of Laura. "The child is quiet, of course," she said. "And she has a wise way with her that *I* call immensely taking. But she's less versed in the ways of wickedness than most babes of six. No mortal could listen to

her questions and think she had travelled long in this weary world."

"Oh, she's innocent enough," her mother replied, "but with her slow seriousness she might be seventy instead of seventeen."

"By some miracle she's escaped the clutches of the roaring, scurrying, end-of-the-century devil," retorted Miss Aspinwall. "No other young girl I know but acts as if the whole world was a grab-bag for her to snatch what she can before it's some one else's turn."

The truth was that Laura had never been to school in her life, and had had very little association with children. In their frequent and prolonged travels abroad her governesses and her mother were her only companions for months at a time. One result of this was that her natural calmness and seriousness were greatly intensified. Another was her unusual attitude toward her mother. To Laura's mind Mrs. Lorraine was the most beautiful, the most brilliant, and the most adorable of women. Her respect and

implicit belief in all her mother's opinions were not untinged with awe. She early became convinced that her mother's will was of unfathomable strength. This feeling increased rather than lessened, until, at eighteen, it never occurred to her to question any of Mrs. Lorraine's plans or demands. Altogether, Miss Aspinwall was not far wrong when she said, "The only real trouble with the child is her undeveloped sense of humour. And that's your own fault. You've trained her to regard you as a patent, unbreakable goddess on the goldest of gold wheels. How could she believe that and have any sense of the ridiculous, too?"

As Laura raced along the sands that afternoon, no one could have accused her of any kind of staidness or solemnity.

"Here, Prince," she called, after they had chased each other up and down the beach, "I'll beat you to the woods."

With head down and skirts flying, she started for the pines that half a mile back showed dark against the sky. Prince was yelping at her heels when, after a breath-

less scramble up the high sand-bank, they dashed into the stubby field, and almost into the arms of Mr. Jack Wilton. He had been as unnoticing as she, so that now they both jumped back as sharply as if from the rebound of actual collision.

“Oh!” panted Laura, as she swayed into equilibrium.

“Oh!” repeated Mr. Wilton, about as helplessly, though instinctively reaching out his arm to steady her. “I hope I haven’t hurt you.”

“Oh, no!” Laura was somewhat uncertain. “I — I — ran into you. I didn’t see you coming.”

“Nor I you. I was bound for the house for more ammunition as fast as I could get there, and I never thought of any one being near.”

“There never is,” said Laura; “everybody always goes the other way. That’s why I raced Prince up here.”

Mr. Wilton straightened an involuntary smile at her evident regret that he had not followed the usual path. “I’m awfully sorry I spoiled the race,” he said,

solemnly; “I’ll go on and never look back once if you’ll finish it.”

Laura was trying to pin back some rebellious tresses that were straying over her ears and forehead, and to restore her hat, that was knocked half off her head to its proper angle. At first she only heard the words and tone. “Oh, I didn’t mean that!” she began, looking up in some distress till she caught him in an unmistakable grin. “Oh!” she said again, foolishly.

“I beg your pardon,” Mr. Wilton choked in his efforts to be properly sober, “but, but — what a sight we must have been as we ran into each other — head on!”

“Yap! Yap! Yap!” Prince, who had been sniffing curiously at the newcomer ever since the abrupt termination of his scamper, now threw himself bodily upon the young man, barking at the top of his shrill treble. And then, to her own surprise, Laura was joining in the peals of laughter that Mr. Wilton no longer tried to restrain.

"Good dog!" said Jack, patting him gratefully, "we're friends for ever, aren't we?" He looked sideways at the young person before him, who had dropped on to a rock and was still laughing in a way to have amazed her mother.

"That's just what he means," she nodded, gleefully, but with literalness. "He never adopts strangers like that unless he has decided they're quite to his taste. He really knows everything," she added, with such entire acquiescence in his canine judgment that Jack, in spite of his amusement, felt still more grateful to Master Prince.

"Do you know," he said, presently, "I believe I've seen you before somewhere."

"That's queer," said Laura, ruminatingly, "because last night I was positive I'd seen you, too."

"Was that the reason you stared at me so sternly from your dark corner?"

"If it was dark," said Laura, reprovingly. "I don't see how you saw that I stared sternly."

"It wasn't too dark. Besides, some

eyes are like lanterns, you know, for lighting up a dark place."

Apparently Laura did not hear. She was studying his face with an embarrassing scrutiny. "I don't believe we could have met, after all. Except for little summer trips home, we've been abroad for nearly three years this last time."

"So was I," said Mr. Wilton, promptly. "Only I've been back now over a year."

"Oh, perhaps then I have seen you. Where were you most of the time?"

"Nearly all of it in Paris and London studying architecture. Of course I travelled round some and went to Italy."

Laura looked disappointed. "I was in Paris last winter, but before we were mostly in Dresden."

"Well, perhaps that's where. I was in Dresden two years ago for nearly three weeks." He laughed. "I don't think they were in love with us at that time. Judging from the way they treated one small American girl, at least."

Laura's eyes opened wide with startled interest. "They hated us," she said, ex-

citedly. “ All through and after the Spanish war. And one day Frau von Hagen had gone into a shop, and I was waiting outside, and some street boys began to hoot me. Then they started to throw things, and I only just dodged a big stone. And — ”

“ No! ” shouted Mr. Wilton. “ That little girl never was you in the world! ”

“ But it was! ” Laura for once pretty nearly shouted, too. “ And that splendid American young man who came along just in time, and caught two of those boys and made their heads come together like clappers, he, oh! he surely was you! ” Jack Wilton could never be hailed as a conquering hero more flatteringly. “ Frau von Hagen came out and dragged me away at that minute, ” she continued, before he had a chance to speak, “ and wouldn’t let me even thank you. It was horrible to be so rude and ungrateful, and I tried to find you out afterward, but I couldn’t. ”

“ I went to London that night, ” said Jack, still looking with amazement

at the tall young woman standing with clasped hands before him. "It couldn't be you," he said, obstinately. "She was a little girl and had her hair in two pig-tails down her back."

Laura laughed delightedly. "Yes, so I was, so I did. That was two years ago, you know, and it was just then I began to grow tall. Besides, you *look* shorter with short dresses and your hair in braids."

"Oh, do you!" Jack still gazed doubtingly. "Well, she was a mighty plucky little girl, anyway. If that stout Dutch lady hadn't lugged her off when my hands were full, I should have told her how I admired her sand."

"I wasn't brave. The reason I didn't scream was that I was so surprised to find them throwing things at me that I didn't have any breath left. What did you do with those boys? Did you hurt them very much?"

Jack chuckled. "Just enough to make them feel that the mighty arm of the United States was on hand to protect

her citizens. I don't believe those same two threw anything more at small American girls."

"It's a wonder you weren't arrested yourself," said Laura, "for molesting German youths."

Jack chuckled again. "Just as I was packing the young scoundrels off, one of those nabobs of the German street did come up. The Arabs hailed him with joy and stood by waiting to see me licked in my turn. There was nothing thin about that policeman's skull. But I managed to bore a hole sufficiently near his gray matter to implant the information that he'd better keep his hands and his street ragamuffins' hands off law-abiding American travellers."

Laura laughed too, and heaved a sigh of satisfaction. "It was lucky he hadn't any thicker skull. Most of them you could bore all day and never get through. Then you'd have had to go to jail and court — and everything — just for me!"

"Not at all," said Jack, easily. "It would have been a pleasure, but really it

was simply to uphold the dignity of Uncle Sam."

"That," said Laura, shyly, "is to make me feel less indebted. But I *am* indebted, just the same. I've often thought that maybe I owed my escape from serious hurt to that young man. And I'm glad you are the man." The big gray eyes were regarding Jack with a grave admiration that he found both uncomfortable and pleasing.

At this moment Prince created an opportune diversion. Growling and barking and twisting himself into a circle in his frantic efforts, he appeared before them dragging a heavy paddle.

"Fine!" cried Jack, while he unwound dog and paddle. "Miss Lorraine, what do you say to trying the canoe I saw back in the creek?"

Laura was very tired of doing nothing, but she looked a little doubtful. "Won't the others be waiting for you?" she asked.

"They must have given me up and forgotten me before this," he smiled. As Laura still hesitated, "We'll float round

where they can see us from the house all the time, so if Mrs. Harmon wants you we'll be within hailing distance." Then he pulled his moustache to hide a wider smile that came at Laura's relieved acceptance.

Neither of them, as a matter of fact, was quite sure of the ethics of the situation. Jack's early training had had little to do with rules of strict etiquette. As for Laura, she had practically never been around the corner without a chaperone. Hence her relief at his proposal to stay within window surveillance.

"How well you paddle," she said, as they pushed out from the landing.

"Old Nautan-at-wo did his best to teach me."

Laura looked inquisitive, and Jack's gaze wandered off to the horizon, while his firm, strong strokes cut the waves with rhythmical precision.

"If you'd like I'll tell you a bit about myself," he said, slowly. "I was brought up in a big country village where my father owns some mills. My mother died

when I was a little fellow. Father sort of runs the town, you know, but he isn't a bit of what you people call 'a swell.' When it was time I went to college near by so's to be home Saturday nights. Then father and I decided that if I was going to be an architect I ought to go abroad. He went over with me first, and he was there every summer. We planned either that I was to go back to Wiltonville," Jack reddened a little at the name, "or else that he would join me wherever I was. Well, there really wasn't anything for me to do at home, and I got the chance here through some London friends. Then, after all, the governor found he couldn't break up. He'd been in harness too long to throw it off at one jump. So he only comes down once in awhile, and I imagine the old chap is pretty lonesome."

"He must miss you awfully." Laura's grave conviction sent a thrill of gratitude through Jack. "But you aren't lonesome, too, are you? You have many friends here?"

"I've lots of acquaintances, and, yes, some friends. But, you see, I'm not just where I belong. Father's business relations made it possible for me to get letters to some of New York's magnates. That's how I came to be with Griswold. And everybody's been very kind, and I've been invited out a lot. But," Jack Wilton looked directly at the earnest young face before him, and spoke with careful emphasis. "But, Miss Lorraine, I'm not one of your four hundred by birth or training or money right. Besides, I don't appreciate them any more than they would me if they knew all about me. And, any way, you can't keep hunting round after fun, if you're doing much work. And there isn't any fun so exciting and interesting as work you like." The boyish enthusiasm made even unsophisticated Laura feel why so many weary people might have taken pains to be "nice" to Mr. Wilton. "So," he went on, quietly, "I've made up my mind this shall be one of my very last dissipations."

"But Aunt Harriet works," put in Laura, eagerly.

"I know it. I don't see how she ever gets time for everything. It's through her that I've met some other people who work, too. Some writers and painters it's a privilege to know."

"Then I suppose you'll accept invitations from *them*." Laura's wistful tone Jack failed to absorb.

"If I'm lucky enough to get any," he laughed.

Laura stifled a sigh and wondered again for the thousandth time what fun there could be in a stupid coming-out party, and a lot of stupid dinners and dances and teas afterward. "It must be fine," she said, enviously, "to be a man with something real to do."

Jack looked at her pityingly. He knew from the papers and from people's comments that Miss Laura Lorraine was one of the richest heiresses of the coming season's débutantes. To his mind it wasn't a position he should like his sister to be in. "Why don't you throw over

the whole thing," he said, unpremeditatedly, "and do something, too? Miss Aspinwall could help you. Didn't I hear you were fond of music?"

"Oh, it would be heavenly! But mother thinks I have a position in society that is just as important for me to fill."

Jack opened his lips impulsively, and then as he saw the tense, overgrave face, he shut them up. "Well," he said, cheerfully, "I'm thinking your mother may be right. It's usually foolish to forswear one's birthright."

CHAPTER IV.

THE last train that afternoon brought a letter from Miss Aspinwall. She deserved their pity instead of reproaches, she assured them. It was a wretched combination of circumstances, but she simply couldn't leave for two days more. She should bring Mr. Dinsmore back with her, and she hoped they'd all stay over the next Sunday to make up for her absence.

Meanwhile it had not occurred to Aunt Harmon to send word to her niece of Mr. Weathersby's invited guest. The first intimation Miss Aspinwall had of Wilton's presence was on the arrival of the train at Coggeshall Thursday afternoon.

“Shades of Sir Robert and Helen Lorraine forbid!” She clutched Mr. Dinsmore's arm, and pointed out of the window. There on the platform stood Jack Wilton with Laura Lorraine. Both young

people looked rosy and happy, and Laura was laughing.

"Whoever saw the child look so gay?" she exclaimed, turning to follow Mr. Dinsmore out. "So that's the way I've been keeping my promise to look after her as if she were my own!"

"I'm inclined to think," murmured Mr. Dinsmore, with a quizzical expression in his keen blue eyes, "that that's just the way you'd have done if she were your own."

Miss Aspinwall threw him a scornful glance. "Such penetration!" Then, with a brilliant smile she stepped off the car and held out a welcoming hand to the tall young fellow who was waiting for her.

"I'm a rank interloper, Miss Aspinwall," he said, before she could speak. "But, really, if I'd known you were in town, I never should have let Mr. Weathersby persuade me to come here with him."

"Then I'm glad you didn't know it," she replied, cordially. "Mr. Weathersby always does exactly as he pleases at the

Oakes, and this time it's a most delightful please. You know Mr. Dinsmore, I believe. He thinks he is going to prove to you that he's the one champion rabbit hunter in the country. I don't see," she added, with apparent guilelessness, "how you are not in the woods with Uncle John this minute. He doesn't usually let his prey escape so easily."

Jack laughed, with perfect unembarrassment. "It wasn't easy, I assure you. But I told him that if he didn't want to take away all the self-respect I ever had he must let me home in time to meet you."

"He'll be pretty cross, though," said Laura, innocently, "when he finds you didn't come till now. Aunt Harmon expected you at half-past two."

"You haven't been waiting here ever since!" exclaimed Miss Aspinwall, with a flash of her eye at Mr. Dinsmore.

"Of course not; we've been doing all sorts of errands in the village for Aunt Harmon, and we took a walk."

"Wilton," said Mr. Dinsmore, as they

walked off the platform, “ whom the gods love die young.”

And Jack, after a first uncomprehending stare, called the older man in his own mind something uncomplimentary, and was thankful the two women didn’t hear.

Miss Aspinwall soon found out that Laura had not written her mother since her first note. “ I might have known it,” she groaned, inwardly. “ Not only do I have to take the punishment for sins that are thrust upon me, but I must do the preliminary confessing also.”

The “ special ” she sent Mrs. Lorraine by the next mail wound up with the following consolatory remarks: “ After all, I can’t see that there is a thing to worry about. If I weren’t well aware that you believe in taking no risks, I shouldn’t mention the matter at all. Personally, I have entire confidence in a few underlying facts. Even if Laura is flattered by the polite attentions of the first man she’s met, I am sure she is not the kind of girl to attract him. She’s too grave and sober. Though he is dead in earnest himself, he

is bubbling over with fun and life. The woman to hold him would either be a girl of Laura's age with all the *esprit* and nonsense she lacks, or else a woman of the world, likely enough much older than himself."

Mrs. Lorraine's answer to this was to take the next express for Coggeshall. Not because she was alarmed by Miss Aspinwall's letter. To begin with, she more than half suspected that lady of a desire to torment her. As for the rest, it would be altogether too melodramatic for her plans to be upset so unceremoniously. Nevertheless, she was not the woman to take success for granted. Neither, as Miss Aspinwall intimated, did she ever fail from any careless slight of supposed trifles. This time, however, she was just too late for precautionary measures. As she stepped on to the Coggeshall platform, Mr. Wilton boarded a train going citywards. All Mrs. Lorraine saw was the back of a tall, broad-shouldered man who carried his head well, and whose clothes seemed to fit.

Miss Aspinwall professed to be extremely sorry for the business telegram that took him away so unexpectedly.

"He's as unusual in his way as Laura in hers," she assured her friend with ill-concealed enjoyment. "And he succeeded in making her laugh at least three times to my certain knowledge."

"Really!" Mrs. Lorraine was wholly unruffled. "Perhaps he might take the place of the dogs. They are a great nuisance."

"Exactly what occurred to me," replied Miss Aspinwall, promptly. "Many sons-in-law are worth much less than that."

"I did not know that we were speaking of sons-in-law. Is it possible," Mrs. Lorraine spoke with cool speculation, "that you and Mr. Weathersby were perhaps slightly ahead of me with your plans?"

"Ahead of you!" Miss Aspinwall's face expressed solemn reproach. "Helen Lorraine, did any one ever get ahead of you?"

"One person," said the other, her voice suddenly sharp. "Which is why I pro-

pose that Laura shall be put in a position where she can run no such risk."

" You'll have to be sure, then, of more things than birth and money."

" I certainly shall. But I don't intend to go without those two attributes, either."

Laura's manner to her mother, when she told her of Mr. Wilton, dispelled any uneasiness that lady may have felt. She showed merely her usual mild interest, somewhat increased by gratitude, for the rescue in Dresden. " He says," she wound up her account, " that he isn't going into society much this winter because he thinks it is stupid, and because he can't do that and work, too. If I were a man I'd feel just that way," she added, valiantly. " I told him you would like to meet him and thank him for pom-melling those German boys."

" Of course," said her mother, perhaps more relieved than she was aware. " He shall be invited, along with the rest of your Aunt Harriet's presentable artist friends to your first reception."

CHAPTER V.



HE society columns of the papers gave much space to describing the début of Miss Laura Lorraine. "In several respects," dilated one journal, "it was an unusual as well as charming affair. It is not often that a woman of such glorious youth and beauty as Mrs. Lorraine has a daughter of débutante age. It is rare also to find the daughter almost equally, if very differently, beautiful. Though Miss Lorraine does indeed resemble her mother, it is in line and contour rather than in expression, colouring, or general effect. . . . The reception itself was noteworthy for the number of well-known authors, painters, and musicians seen among the fashionable throng. Mrs. Lorraine has always kept more or less in touch with the world of art and letters. That so large a contingent of this world was present, speaks volumes for the intel-

lectual standing of the hostess. . . . It would be invidious to single out any one name among so many distinguished guests. We may mention, however, that Sir Robert Martinmas, the Englishman whose great wealth is no better known than his fame as a scientific writer, honoured Mrs. Lorraine by making her daughter's début that of his own in New York society."

On the whole, Laura had a better time that evening than she expected. She was enough like the rest of humanity to feel the pleased exhilaration at being the centre of so much admiring attention. It was agreeable, too, to know that one really did look pretty in a lovely gown. Best of all was the fact that one's mother had said, enthusiastically, "Well, child, I believe you'll be the belle of the season." Finally, there was some entertainment in seeing so many kinds of people, and wondering how they could be so different and yet all say very much the same things. To be sure, there were a few exceptions to this. Laura smiled as she saw Miss Aspinwall

through the crowd. One could be reasonably sure that she would put some of her differences into words.

"What do you mean," she exclaimed, "by appearing so blooming? You need never expect me to waste any sympathy over you again. I supposed you'd be bored to death, as white as your gown, and twice as limp. I was pitying you so that if it hadn't been for a mortal terror of your mother, I should certainly have brought Prince with me to cheer you up. And after all my worry you are actually enjoying yourself!"

"People have been so pleasant," said Laura, apologetically, "and I'm not a bit tired yet."

"Good girl! If you continue not to get tired, people will most likely continue to be pleasant, and then,—there you are, a social success. Which," she added, solemnly, "as your mother can tell you, is the one thing of importance for a woman."

"What nonsense are you instilling now, Harriet?" said Mrs. Lorraine, turning from old General Wharton, who had

seized every lull in the stream of callers to monopolise her attention.

"I'm telling Laura," answered Miss Aspinwall, distinctly, but too low for those near to hear, "that the one thing necessary for a girl is to be a social success. But I didn't explain why. It's because her second public appearance will then probably be as successful as her first."

"Oh!" Laura turned scarlet. "You mean her wedding, I suppose."

"Harriet Aspinwall," said her mother at the same time, and too softly for Laura to hear, "if you are going to turn into a meddler, I'll pack up and take the child to London."

The painter looked deeply grieved. "Meddle with you? I should as soon think of putting my fingers into Satan's own pie."

At this moment a sudden light came into Mrs. Lorraine's eyes, and Miss Aspinwall turned with unabashed curiosity to discover the cause. At the other end of the drawing-room, towering head and shoulders above most of those about him,

was Sir Robert Martinmas. Miss Aspinwall smiled, and prepared to wait where she was.

"By the way," she said, easily, to Mrs. Lorraine, "I've been meaning to tell you how stunning I think these rooms are now. I don't believe there is a house in the city with such beautiful big empty spaces on its walls."

"Glad you like them." Mrs. Lorraine's interest seemed a little forced. "The tapestries were so good I couldn't bear to cover them up. Ah! Sir Robert," holding out her hand to the tall blond man, "this is very nice of you. You didn't tell me in London that we were going to be fortunate enough to have you here this season."

"I—I really didn't know it myself." Miss Aspinwall thought he actually blushed.

"And indeed," she murmured to herself, "such undisguised admiration ought to turn him purple."

"You remember my daughter," continued Mrs. Lorraine, with what Miss As-

pinwall called undue haste. "Laura, of course you haven't forgotten Sir Robert Martinmas."

The Englishman shook hands heartily, his admiring gaze intensified. "I hope all your days to come," he said, earnestly if rather heavily, "will be as fair as you yourself are to-day."

"That makes another different one," thought Laura, while she thanked him shyly.

"The next time I attend a reception," announced Mr. Dinsmore, as he strolled up to the group, "I'm going to follow Sir Robert's plan and get there after everybody has come and just before anybody thinks of going. Ever since nine o'clock I've been marching round in a never ending procession trying to get in a word edgewise with my hostess."

"If you've been here as long as that," said Miss Aspinwall, "I suppose you've come up now to make your adieu."

"It's a great mistake to suppose," replied Mr. Dinsmore, calmly. "I'm going to stay right here with the receiving party

till even General Wharton has said good night. What do you think of this for a show, Martinmas?" Sir Robert and Mr. Dinsmore had been college friends at Oxford.

"I think," answered the Englishman, enthusiastically, "it's a pity that brigand Paris couldn't have had a view of American women. He wouldn't have been tempted then to go robbing poor old Menelaus of his one treasure."

"Ladies, make your best bows," said Mr. Dinsmore, applauding the baronet.

"The fuss made over Helen," began Miss Aspinwall, "is proof positive to me that the boasted Greek beauty must have been about as rare as honest politics in New York."

"Please, some one," begged Mrs. Lorraine, "stop her before she gets started on her city iniquity hobby-horse."

"Don't worry. I'm not even going to mount him," said Miss Aspinwall, curtly. "Laura, has Mr. Wilton been in?"

"No,—why, there he is this minute."

"With Madame d'Honneur on his

arm," exclaimed Miss Aspinwall. "Whoever has seen her speak to a young man since her son lost his reason in the hazing at college! And that was more than twenty years ago!"

"Well," said Mrs. Lorraine, softly, as the two came toward them, "he is handsome enough to work a change of heart in most women."

Madame d'Honneur, leaning heavily with one hand on her ebony cane and with the other on Jack Wilton's arm, brought herself and her supports to an abrupt halt.

"Helen Lorraine," she squeaked, in a high, cracked voice, "if it hadn't been for this young man, I might have broken my neck at your door." She lifted her cane to interrupt Jack's laughing disclaimer. "It is not to be made light of, Mr. Wilton, either my escape or the manner of it. What with an abnormally stupid footman and your icy sidewalk, I should have fallen if this young man hadn't had the gallantry and quickness to help me. Most young men to-day," she added in her high

register that carried clearly, “have very little of either of those attributes.”

“Now, madame,” interposed Miss Aspinwall, trying to save Jack’s blushes, “don’t say such damaging things about America! Sir Robert Martinmas will go home and report it all over the British Isles.”

Madame d’Honneur fixed her sharp eyes on the Englishman, who looked a trifle bewildered over the whole affair. “So far as I have observed,” she remarked, stonily, “I have failed to see that England can claim any great superiority in either quickness of perception or in the manners of its population, young or old.” Then much to the relief of her listeners, she turned to Laura. “My dear,” she said, patting her hand kindly, “you look sweet and lovely, and I hope society’s poison will never make you sour or unhappy. Mr. Wilton, I’ll leave you with her, while General Wharton takes me to the dining-room.” And she calmly appropriated the old gentleman who had



““I NEVER KNEW UNTIL THIS FALL HOW MUCH
LAURA AND I OWE YOU’’”

just come up for another chat with Mrs. Lorraine.

Jack meanwhile had taken the first opportunity to tell Laura that now he was positive she never had been that small girl in Dresden. "She was a very pretty child," he acknowledged, "but she never could have grown into this present Miss Lorraine."

She flushed a little at his frank flattery, and thought to herself with a pleased smile that he was "still a different one."

Mrs. Lorraine was smiling, too, as she turned to the young man. "I never knew until this fall how much Laura and I owe you," she said, with the gracious softness men both older and younger than Jack Wilton had found bewilderingly entrancing.

What with his embarrassment over his presentation by Madame d'Honneur, and his recognition of Laura's loveliness, he really until now had hardly noticed Mrs. Lorraine. His first thought was that this stately young woman could not possibly be the mother of the tall, grown-up maiden

beside her. After that he thought of nothing, except that he had never dreamed of such beauty. He hardly knew how he answered her smiling words, and it was not till he caught Miss Aspinwall's amused expression that he was brought to his senses. Later she found chance to whisper, reassuringly, "You did much better than most! Many's the wise man I've seen turn into a blithering idiot at the first sight of her."

"I suppose," she moralised, on her way home that evening, to Mr. Dinsmore, who had coolly followed her into her carriage, "that the universality of a beautiful woman's fascinations is what keeps her head steady. One who wasn't used from babyhood to creating furors of adulation never could stand even such mild obeisance as young Wilton gave Helen."

Mr. Dinsmore laughed. "Wasn't the boy amazed, though, at finding such a mother to Laura!"

"No more so than every other man who first meets her. I can't get over the amazement myself whenever I look at

her. Moreover," she added, perhaps irrelevantly, "I can quite understand why every man Jack of you falls at once head over heels in love with her."

"Every man Jack of us," answered Mr. Dinsmore, shortly, "doesn't."

Miss Aspinwall looked at him wickedly. "Well, I believe you never have thrown yourself completely at her feet. I've always wondered why."

"You haven't, either. You know perfectly well why."

Miss Aspinwall's gaze became reproachfully indignant. "I don't. It's absolutely beyond my comprehension. I never saw any other signs that you were so marvellously different from others of your loyal sex."

"I'm not. There have been full plenty in exactly my position. If you don't know what and how that is, I'll tell you this minute." There was a determined expression about the none too weak mouth of Mr. Dinsmore that somehow made Miss Aspinwall quake with apprehension.

"You needn't bother," she said, airily.

"Probably I shouldn't be interested."

"Probably you wouldn't. You never are in me or my doings." Mr. Dinsmore's voice was savage.

"Doings!" Her tone was light, but there was enough scorn in it to sting. "I've never known you to have any 'doings.' You can't expect a busy woman like me to keep up a vivid interest in your dogs and your horses and your cotillons, can you?"

"I don't know but horses and dogs are fully as elevating things to devote one's time to, as forever painting fool society women."

It was Miss Aspinwall's turn to smart. "At least," she said, haughtily, "I work. I'm not a drag on the universe that I am a part of."

"Maybe not. But how about the poverty-stricken painters, who, if you were out of it might get some of your big-price orders? Perhaps the universe would be full as well off if you gave them a few chances."

"It isn't true." There was a passion-

ate note new to the man. “What do you suppose I do with the money I make by my ‘big-price’ orders?”

Before he could answer she turned gentle once more. “Don’t let’s fight, Tom. I’m not asking you to go to money grubbing. There’s plenty you might do with your wealth and position without that.”

“There’s plenty,” said he, pointedly, but accepting the *amende honorable*, “that I try to do and am not allowed, already. There’s quite enough strenuousness in existence without my going on a hunt for more.”

“Well,” replied the lady, firing her last shot, sharply, “I like such a youth as Jack Wilton. He carries purpose and determination and endeavour all over him. He’ll make a name for himself.”

Mr. Dinsmore shook his head, dolefully. “What a pity he’s not eight or ten years older. It’s a vast shame for two souls with such mighty aims to be separated by a few paltry years.”

“You’re incorrigible. One might as

well try single-handed to ameliorate the condition of the widows in India as to change you."

"It's always a doubtful good to try to alter the result of generations of belief and training. Most likely now," he helped her out as the carriage drew up at her door, "if I were all made over to your order, I'd be in worse favour with you than I am at this minute." He held her hand with ostentatious anxiety, but there was a queer little pleading expression in his eyes.

"Nonsense," she said, and bade him good night brusquely.

CHAPTER VI.

OT long after Laura's début Mrs. Lorraine had an attack of the grippe that kept her closely housed for nearly three weeks. Never was sickness more inopportune. She felt that it would be less hard to bear if Laura were sick, too. At first, indeed, she almost decided not to let the girl accept any invitations till she herself was able to go out with her. Miss Aspinwall persuaded her to relinquish that idea.

"Of course no one can manage for Laura quite as you would," said the painter, "but really, considering the kind of things she is booked for during the next two or three weeks, I don't see that any irreparable accident can happen. At least," she grinned openly, "Sir Robert Martinmas is sure to be everywhere the child goes, and if it will give you any

comfort, I'll agree personally to supervise their meetings."

The jumping pains and her general feeling of wretchedness made Mrs. Lorraine less haughtily self-reliant than usual. For once she longed to have her motives and ideas somewhat understood.

"Harriet," she said, slowly, "you ought to sympathise with me about Laura. You know what my married life was well enough to appreciate my efforts to prevent hers from ever becoming like it. No one can tell how two human beings are ever going to get along together in a daily companionship. But at least, certain catastrophes can be prevented beforehand. I simply don't intend to let Laura come too much in contact with men who lack the necessary adjuncts. As for Sir Robert, — he has everything. I don't know a single American who can rank above him in any one particular, unless it is money. Moreover, he has most undoubted charm and a very good heart. What more could a girl, even my Laura, ask?"

Miss Aspinwall's flippancy had entirely

disappeared. " You have only left out one point in your reckoning, Helen."

" Which is? "

" Nothing but love, each for the other."

Mrs. Lorraine looked at the artist curiously. " I never knew your creed considered that at all. I supposed you as well as I had seen quite too much of the misery following fast on the heels of so-called love-matches to have faith in the article."

" So-called love-matches, certainly," answered Miss Aspinwall. " I merely thought that if you were planning the perfect thing for Laura, it was a pity not to include that among the rest."

" Well," said Mrs. Lorraine, shortly, " if love didn't come with all that rest, there's as little sense in love as — as is usually proved to be the case."

" But supposing Laura has the bad taste to become interested in some one else first? "

" Oh," Mrs. Lorraine pressed her aching head, rebelliously, " that's just why this sickness is so outrageous. Prevention is always easy. Laura should never have

a chance to fall in love with the wrong man if I were with her from the beginning. So often it is the beginning that makes all the trouble."

"Your old method of victory without battle," admired Miss Aspinwall. "Well, I don't grudge the winning to one who hasn't first trampled over me to get the goal. Meanwhile, don't worry. Really, you know, it would be extraordinary for that quiet, reserved child to lose her heart in her first month out."

Undoubtedly Miss Aspinwall was right. Besides, Sir Robert was in town now, and something might take him away sooner than he expected. After all, with careful chaperonage, good, rather than disaster, was probable. So for three weeks Laura was largely away from her mother's controlling mind. To the girl's own astonishment, she found those weeks less trying than she had feared. In the first place, much to every one's surprise, she proved to be a social success. With the younger set, to be sure, she was not a favourite. Altogether too quiet, reserved

and earnest for their youthful frivolity, she soon was adored by all elderly people, and before long not a few men, who seldom noticed the “buds,” were observed to be paying her much attention. She must have been more unlike most girls than she already was not to feel the subtle flattery of such distinction. As for the men, they often found themselves talking to the grave-eyed, sweet-faced girl as they had not thought of talking since the days of their own nearly forgotten illusions.

On the whole, it was a kind of triumph to please Mrs. Lorraine, for she thought it the safest sort. Moreover, Sir Robert Martinmas, who was allowed to see the invalid the first day she was down-stairs, made so many charming speeches about Laura that Mrs. Lorraine felt that things had gone very well during her absence from the field. Laura’s own confidences confirmed this impression, and it was not till she herself was out once more that she found things rather different than she expected.

This happened at the Van Breen dinner,

an annual affair that old Mr. Van Breen had insisted upon delaying till she could attend. There was never anything stupider, longer, or heavier than one of these dinners. As Mrs. Lorraine took her seat beside her host, she glanced up and down the table with much inward distaste. There was the usual lack of rhyme or reason in the selection and placing of the guests. She wondered curiously if an undiluted Knickerbocker descent and generations' long residence in Washington Square always made such a mess of supposed festivities. Laura, who had been taken out by a young nephew of the host, was far down the other side, and for some time Mrs. Lorraine failed to see who was on her right.

"That's an extraordinarily good-looking chap by Laura," said Mr. Van Breen, noting the direction of Mrs. Lorraine's eyes.

The young widow smiled politely. If there was a homelier man in New York than Jacob Van Breen she did not know him.



WASHINGTON SQUARE AND ARCH

"He brought excellent letters of introduction from London and Paris," went on the host, urbanely, without observing his listener's surprise. "And Griswold told me the other day that he's got more stuff in him than any youngster he's ever had in the office."

Mrs. Lorraine looked bewildered. "I didn't know your nephew was with Griswold."

"Jacob!" Mr. Van Breen's mouth twitched grimly. "That precious rascal would as soon think of becoming a day labourer. I'm talking of young Wilton, other side of Laura. Don't you know him?"

Just then Laura leaned forward, and Mrs. Lorraine found herself looking straight at Jack Wilton's laughing face. She felt herself suddenly turn to ice. Jack Wilton! The Dresden youth! How much had Laura seen of him these past three weeks? Why had she never mentioned him?

The dinner was interminable. After it, in spite of all her efforts, she found no

chance to speak to Wilton. It gave her some satisfaction to see that Laura also had only a word or two with him. And she thanked her stars that the face he turned to the girl expressed only a smiling surface interest. When at last the footman shut the carriage door, she settled back into her corner feeling as if she were on the verge of a yawning chasm. As they rolled out of the quiet, dimmer square, the lights that turned the avenue's night into a stage day splashed momentarily into the carriage windows, throwing the delicate, flushed face beside her into sharpened planes. As she looked, the mother's disquiet grew. There certainly was an unusual shine in the depths of the big gray eyes. She could actually feel a sort of tremulous excitement about the curving lips.

"Laura," she said, abruptly, "what are you thinking about?"

The girl started and hesitated a moment. "I don't know, unless it was that the dinner was very pleasant."

"My dear!" remonstrated Mrs. Lor-

raine. "I never before heard one of the Van Breen leaden affairs called pleasant! Instructive, perhaps, or, to the uninitiated, impressive. But pleasant — !" She lifted her eyebrows.

The flush on Laura's face deepened, and Mrs. Lorraine's annoyance increased.

"It does make a difference, though," she went on, suavely, "whom you have to sit by. Unfortunately, mein Herr Host never omits showering all his attentions upon me. I am very sure there can be nothing heavier than his conversation — unless it is his person."

"His nephew is almost as heavy," said Laura. "I'm always tongue-tied when he tries to talk to me. But to-night he didn't bother much, he had such a lot to eat."

Mrs. Lorraine laughed. "You and the young man on the other side seemed to have time for something besides eating."

"Mr. Wilton?" There certainly was an added light in the happy, earnest eyes, and Mrs. Lorraine felt as if some one were choking her. "He always makes me talk."

It sounded to the mother like the apologetic tone of proprietorship, and she had an insane desire to shake somebody. Her voice was smooth, however, as she replied.

"He's a very good-looking fellow. I wonder where he got his well-bred airs? Harriet said his father kept a country grocery store."

"Why, no, he didn't," said Laura, indignantly. "They own some mills, and Mr. Wilton must be a very nice old gentleman. He sent his son abroad, and — and — they're considered to be almost *kings* where they live."

"Ah!" said Mrs. Lorraine, calmly. "What a lot you know about him! You must have seen a good deal of him while I've been sick."

Laura's flush deepened. "I — I haven't seen very much of him since I came back from Aunt Harriet's. We got well acquainted down there, you know. And — and," in a burst of confidence, "each time I've seen him this winter, I've seemed to know him a great deal better than I did before."

Laura little mistrusted the wrathful consternation that was making tumult in her mother's mind.

"I've no doubt he is a very nice boy," she said, smoothly. "Only I can't exactly understand why, in his position, he should be quite — quite received as he is."

There was no trace of irritation or sneer in the tones, yet Laura at once felt that perhaps she had been a little too free in her relations with Mr. Wilton. Whereby were sown the first seeds of self-consciousness in her thoughts.

"Well," reflected Mrs. Lorraine, some short time later as she sat by the open fire in her dressing-room, "this is a charming affair. Laura almost, if not quite, in love with Jack Wilton! A nobody! No family! No money!" She waved her hands indignantly at the glowing coals. "Everything spoiled before anything is done. I simply won't have it." She shook the cushions beside her, and straightened herself decisively. The sharp, intent look on the fair face would have been a revelation to her friends. Of them all, only Miss Aspin-

wall had ever perceived the iron purposes that lay under the smooth, graceful ways of Helen Lorraine. Even she did not understand her as truly as did Laura. Laura was the one person in the world who appreciated at their true value her mother's mighty determination and unfaltering will. If the girl had seen her now and guessed the thoughts behind that fixed look, Mrs. Lorraine need not have worried any more about Jack Wilton. Once thoroughly realising her mother's point of view, Laura would have known too well the futility of trying to oppose her. The young romance, if there were one, had died a sudden, hopeless death. Fortunately, or unfortunately, it never occurred to Mrs. Lorraine to tell Laura her plans. Her principle was always to gain her points without running the risk of opposition. Or, rather, as Miss Aspinwall had said, she hated disturbances even worse than she hated defeat. Consequently, her first care was to escape any kind of contradiction. Instead of forcing Laura to see the impossibility of Jack Wilton, she

therefore bent all her energies to devise some other way for accomplishing her purpose. When she confided to Harriet Aspinwall her wishes for Laura, she had only hinted at the strength and intensity of them. In proportion as her own marriage was one continued horror, had she longed and determined to have Laura's wedded life its exact opposite. She early vowed that not one outside essential should be lacking in the man who was to be her son-in-law. Her consent was no more to be given to a union with some one of the vapid, fast scions of New York's multi-millionaires, than to an honest, clean son of the people. At the very height socially, morally, intellectually, and financially, must this prospective bridegroom be, or she would have none of him. Doubtless, ambition for such a "great alliance" as even New York rarely witnesses, had something to do with the case. At least, however, she believed that this was the only way she could be reasonably sure of Laura's happiness.

Now, as she carefully reviewed the evening, she felt more and more strongly that things were in a precarious condition. Most certainly she had not the slightest idea of allowing Laura to marry Jack Wilton. The question was, could she prevent it without war? War, she was firmly convinced, would defeat all her other plans. If she peremptorily ordered Laura to give up Jack, the girl would not be likely on top of that to fancy the man offered in his stead. And although she had scouted Miss Aspinwall's suggestion as to the necessity of love, she surely would not drive Laura to a thoroughly distasteful marriage. With a puzzled sigh she pulled the cushions from behind her and sat up to consider the matter calmly. Not since the days when her husband was alive, had things seemed so difficult.

"I don't wonder," she began, slowly, "that Laura is attracted by that Jack Wilton. Even the little I saw made me feel he must be a distinct relief after one

has been satiated with Van Breen, Vanderwaren, and that set of gilded fools."

Once more she saw the look that was on Laura's face in the carriage. "Ugh!" she shivered, picking up a cushion and thrusting it impatiently behind her. "There's no doubt the child has been more than a little attracted. Poor baby! Well, the one thing now is to prevent Wilton from caring for her. Unless I am very far wrong he doesn't yet, and if that is true I'll see that he has no more chances. She'll soon get over it if he doesn't show any sign of reciprocating her feeling. Maybe it will end in our having to leave town, though," she thought further, in some dismay. "Unless we retire from the world we are likely to meet the youth continually. Dear me! Isn't there some other way out of it?" As she looked up impatiently, she caught a full-length reflection of herself in the glass. There was good reason for her involuntary smile of pleasure. From the tumbled golden hair and softly moulded face to the dainty dressing-gown, whose folds suggested

exquisite lines of the figure beneath, it was a picture to bring delight to even a very troubled mind. For a minute she studied the glass carefully, and then she broke into a low laugh, and nodded her head saucily.

“That gray hair this morning,” she asserted, aloud, “couldn’t have been one of a family. I’ll defy a microscope to find any more. Really, who’d believe I’m thirty-six if they didn’t know Laura? Actually at times that solemn child looks as old as her mother.” The thought of Laura brought back her worry, and with it a sudden light flashed over her face. Her breath came quickly. Had she found a solution of the difficulty? Slowly the full significance of the thought came to her and she sank back once more among the cushions with a little gasp of triumph.

“It would be perfectly easy,” she mused, remembering her many undesired conquests. “And it isn’t so preposterous. He can’t be very far from thirty, and I don’t look a day over twenty-five. I am afraid Laura’s dream is doomed.”

For a moment she felt keenly for the girl's possible pain. She had, however, a firm belief in the general instability of youthful affections. Besides, she was persuaded that she had discovered the thing in time to prevent any serious consequences.

CHAPTER VII.

SOCIETY, so far this season, had seen comparatively little of Mr. Jack Wilton. The year before his letters of introduction had given him entrance to the inner temple of New York's social life. For awhile he had been amused with the new experience. He was also, perhaps, rather flattered by the attention his good looks and good manners brought him. But very soon he grew bored. It was tiresome to hear everlastingly of race-tracks, the horse-show, dogs and their ribbons, and the private histories of prima donnas and chorus girls. Even the détours towards golf and steam yachts were not much more diverting. Moreover, to keep pace with these people, and to work, too, he soon found impossible. At the time of his visit to the Oakes, he quite meant to let "Society" flock by itself without him.

Yet, soon after the Van Breen dinner, he found himself more and more frequently at the places where Mrs. Lorraine and Laura were to be met. No one, least of all Jack himself, perceived how cleverly the widow was managing things. At first she contented herself with being generally charming and alluring whenever she met the young architect. Laura at these times was either not in evidence at all, or else her mother manœuvred so skilfully that any sort of tête-à-tête between the two was practically impossible. Soon, however, she found that progress in this way was extremely slow. Jack accepted altogether too few invitations. Then, one night, when Laura was going elsewhere, she asked him to join Miss Aspinwall, Mr. Dinsmore, and herself at the opera.

On this occasion, Miss Aspinwall was so occupied watching her friend that Mr. Dinsmore told her wrathfully that the next time she wanted an escort she'd better get a messenger boy.

“Sh!” replied the lady, with a conciliatory smile. “I’m studying Helen. If

I could only learn how she does it! It isn't wholly her beauty, I'm convinced. There's a regular system behind it."

"System for what?" said Mr. Dinsmore, tartly, not at all appeased.

"For enslaving the whole of your cantankerous sex. If I had it this minute you'd be looking at me the way that boy is at her, instead of glowering like an ugly tom-cat."

"If you evinced half the interest in me or my doings that she's already showered on Wilton and his ambitions, you might find me with a different expression."

"Attention! That's just it!" Miss Aspinwall looked at him in admiration. "Aren't you bright! The next man that I like the looks of I'm going to overwhelm with such attention as he hasn't received since he spoke pieces to his mother's friends. Maybe *I* shall be properly appreciated then."

Mr. Dinsmore said something in his throat, and devoted the rest of the evening to listening strictly to the music.

Meanwhile Jack was finding himself



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"YOU'D BE LOOKING AT ME THE WAY THAT BOY
IS AT HER'"

delightfully understood and sympathised with. His ambitions were grasped before he had explained them, his aims were applauded, he himself was enveloped in a subtle aroma of intelligent flattery that made him feel the peer of world-known geniuses. And it was all done by the most beautiful woman he had ever met. Before the evening was over, he was quite ready to take back all the slurs and slings he had flung at "Society." Surely, if such a woman was the product of that same society, he must have grossly misjudged the whole class! Was it any wonder, after this, that Mrs. Lorraine found little difficulty in seeing as much as she wished of the young architect? It was only necessary to mention that she was to be at such and such a place to be pretty sure of finding Jack there also. At the same time, she managed that he should see very little of Laura. During these weeks of her campaign, the young widow's tact prevented even the busiest busybody from mistrusting how much she and young Wilton were together. She knew too well

how often gossip spoils the most innocent of friendships. Besides which, though her object was his entire conquest, it was only for the purpose of preventing his attachment to Laura. She was considerate enough not to wish him to be curiously watched or pitied by the outside world. As the weeks went on and they saw more and more of each other, she began by degrees to be genuinely sorry that he had not the necessary position, socially and financially, to be acceptable as Laura's husband. The unspoiled enthusiasms, the clear vigour of thought, the real sweetness of a clean nature, along with inherent strength and dignity, were so apparent in the boy that she sometimes wondered if the lack of those two worldly attributes might not be ignored. Probably what kept her original purpose firm was the continued presence in town of Sir Robert Martinmas. She was seeing him nearly as often as Jack Wilton, and she still found nothing which made her change her first opinion of him. He was the ideal — with none of Jack's limitations.

If gossip was quiet as regards Jack and Mrs. Lorraine, it was rife over the baronet. Any one could see that he never missed a chance to be at the charming widow's, and speculation was busy as to whether he was most attracted by mother or daughter. Mrs. Lorraine's designs, again, she was careful to keep to herself. But at least she had succeeded in making Laura and Sir Robert excellent friends. As yet, certainly, there had never been such a look on the girl's face when he was under discussion as she had surprised after the Van Breen dinner. On the other hand, she had seen nothing like it again when Jack was near. Altogether, things were going much to her liking. Though she did not consider it safe to abandon her siege of Jack's affections, she felt sure enough of his admiration and need of her to allow him and Laura somewhat more freedom in meeting.

During these weeks Miss Aspinwall had been too occupied with certain perplexities of her own to spend much time trying to unravel other people's mysteries. Occa-

sionally, however, she discovered herself putting together Mrs. Lorraine's present attitude toward Mr. Jack Wilton and her former emphatic remarks about the kind of man she could contemplate for son-in-law. Along with these reflections came remembrances of certain slight happenings at the Oakes.

"I wonder," she said one day to Mr. Dinsmore, "if interference in one's friend's affairs is always as useless as it is impertinent?"

"I'd put it the other way. Is it always as impertinent as it is useless? Undoubtedly, it is always the latter. I should be the last to say it was the former to you." Mr. Dinsmore was feeling unpleasant. He had just made his monthly request to have his portrait painted, only to receive the equally regular refusal.

Miss Aspinwall gave him a scornful glance. "The manners of most people," she remarked, with cutting emphasis, "aren't improved by continual association with jockeys and dog breeders."

"I don't know that they would be any

better in ward politics or philanthropic slumming," said he, drumming unconcernedly on the window-pane.

Miss Aspinwall sat down on a pile of canvases, and began to clean her palette. "Tom Dinsmore, I've interfered for the last time in your affairs. If you want to waste your money, squander your time, and throw away your brains by just doing nothing all the rest of your days, you can. I'll never say another word." She was conscious of a note of wounded pride in her tones, and she stopped abruptly, and then went on with elaborate indifference. "After all, because your father left a name that all New York honours, why should it be expected that his son would be like him?"

The man by the window bit his lip, and stopped drumming. Then he turned to the painter with a whimsical smile. "Come, Harry, don't be too hard. You know what the old gentleman used to say when you tried to pull my hair in our nursery days."

"Harriet, you're quite right. The

young rascal deserves to lose every hair of his head. But I'm afraid total baldness won't change the nature of the animal. And, besides, there wouldn't be any hair left to pull next time.'" With her head on one side and her eyes half-closed, she quoted with the exact inflection of the original utterance.

Mr. Dinsmore's laugh was a little hoarse. "And do you remember how I always made peace with you on such occasions?" He dropped on one knee, and clasped his hands over his breast. "'Please, I'm very bad, and I'm very sorry. I love you very much, and I'll try to be gooder.'"

His eyes were lowered in deep humility, or he might have seen a sudden tenderness in hers.

"If you'll be gooder, I'll forgive you. And you are just as likely to reform now as you were then." The unusual softness in her voice made the suppliant lift his head quickly. But she had already turned her attention to her palette. "What I started to say," she said, coolly, "had

reference to young Wilton and Helen Lorraine. What do you suppose he thinks of all the attention she's lavishing upon him?"

"I've no means of probing the thinking department of that youngster. *I* should say he'd got a superb cinch."

"I'm not so sure." She shook her head.
"Helen's not doing all that for fun."

"What for, then? She's certainly enjoying it too well for it to be duty."

"Maybe. But I feel sometimes as if Jack ought to be warned."

"Of what?"

"Well,—that Helen would never consent to his being Laura's husband, for instance.

"Laura! what's Laura to do with it? You must have a bee in your own bonnet! Just you let 'em alone. He's got to have experience, anyway. I should say he was getting it dead easy."

Nevertheless, the next time Miss Aspinwall saw Jack Wilton, she couldn't resist investigating. It was at the opening night of a loan exhibition at the Union League

Club, where one of her canvases held a post of honour. She was looking at a noted Whistler on the other side of the room when Mr. Wilton joined her.

“Why, yes,” he said, in answer to her admiring reflections, “it’s beautiful, in its own dark, retiring way. But I always wonder if Whistler really sees people mahogany coloured.”

“That’s not mahogany colour,” retorted Miss Aspinwall, laughing.

“Well, no, it certainly hasn’t the bloom and shine of it. But I don’t call it flesh, either. I believe he paints everybody in a dim, gray closet. Perhaps his result is poetry, but I don’t see how any one can call it portraiture of living people. Now you, over there in your ‘Cavalier,’ you’ve got glowing, pulsating flesh. And I think you have poetry, too. I’d like to have you paint my father, or any one dear to me.”

Miss Aspinwall made a bow. “That’s what I call the proper spirit,” she laughed, “to be willing to back up one’s opinions so practically. I wish you’d persuade Mrs.



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Lorraine to agree with you," she added.
"I want to paint her."

"Wouldn't she be a glorious subject!"
The unqualified enthusiasm made the painter smile.

"But she will sit, she says, only just long enough ahead of the event to have the picture done for Laura's wedding day." She wanted to watch the effect of her words on Jack's face, but an acquaintance at that moment caught her eye. By the time she had bowed in return, whatever expression might have appeared on the open countenance before her, nothing was left but a smiling question. "And I tell her," she went on, plaintively, "that considering her iron regulations, by the time that occurrence takes place, she's likely to be gray and wizzled."

"What are the iron regulations?" he said, almost too carelessly, she thought.

"Mrs. Lorraine's marriage was not a happy one," she began, slowly. "No one ever speaks of it, but everybody knows that much. She is determined to prevent any such possibility in Laura's life."

"Any mother would do the same."

"Yes, but perhaps not in the same way. The man who marries Laura must have everything. He's got to stand at the very top, morally and intellectually and physically. And she doesn't stop there. He must have besides everything that money, birth, and social position can give. Take it altogether, there really aren't many men around New York to fill the requirements." She did not try to look at him this time. She was apparently studying the small Sargent next the Whistler.

For a moment there was silence. Then, before it grew too awkward, the young architect spoke cheerfully. "Oh, I don't know. They're not so scarce. I could think of two right off who'd fill the bill."

Miss Aspinwall thanked her stars for the tone. "It's more than I can. If it isn't too inquisitive, who are they?"

"You certainly ought to know better than I do." There was a twinkle in his eyes. "Mr. Dinsmore is one."

The woman laughed. "Tom Dinsmore! My dear boy, you don't begin to

appreciate Mrs. Lorraine's point of view. He doesn't come up to any of her requirements, unless it's in mere social standing."

"Well, I think he's immense," said Jack, stubbornly, with what the painter thought delightful loyalty. "But I guess he isn't in the market," he added, with a flash of fun.

"Who's the other?" questioned she, blandly.

"Sir Robert Martinmas. Only he's too old."

"He isn't more than thirty-seven or eight. No older than Mr. Dinsmore. Yes, do you know, strictly *entre nous*, I have thought of him myself. He really is a fine fellow. Even Mrs. Lorraine might be satisfied with him."

"I suppose Miss Lorraine's opinion would count for something," he said, very quietly.

"Suppositions are much like circumstantial evidence,—frequently far from the truth. Laura's opinion is quite beside the question, because she will undoubtedly agree absolutely with her mother." Miss

Aspinwall looked her listener straight in the face as she finished. Somewhat to her surprise, although she thought there was a faint flush on his cheeks, there was only amused interest in his eyes.

Later in the evening, she watched him curiously, as he stood talking to Mrs. Lorraine. "What a stunning couple they make," she said to herself. "I wonder, after all, if it is possible—" She did not finish the thought, unless it was what she presently put into words to Mr. Dinsmore.

"Tom, you were quite right. An ordinary human mortal is a fool to attempt any interference with other people's plans."

"Which, though undoubtedly true, need not make you tongue-tied, so far as I am concerned," he answered, with soothing magnanimity.

CHAPTER VIII.

HE season had been a fast and furious one, even for New York's pace. An unusual number of "buds," and the presence of several titled foreigners, had kept the matrimonial market in an ever increasing fever of speculation. Laura's long and daily walk, that she was never allowed to neglect, had been the cause, her mother was assured, of her showing the strain so little. A bit of added delicacy, and perhaps a slight increase in her soft quietness were the only changes so close an observer as Miss Aspinwall found. As for Mrs. Lorraine herself, though unlike her daughter in many ways, she had the same unhurried calm that seldom allowed itself to get uselessly stirred or excited.

"The fact is," as Miss Aspinwall had more than once remarked, "there really is no reason for Helen to fuss and fume

in an effort to outdo others. The Lord Almighty outdid Himself when he fashioned her, and it isn't likely she has got to take any further trouble. She simply has to *be*. The rest of us may do all the hopping round and worrying we please. It only makes us red in the face and shows up her unruffled freshness the more effectively."

This season, however, even Mrs. Lorraine had not found everything quite as easily arranged. It was difficult enough always to keep undesirable men at a safe distance from Laura. It also required extremely skilful generalship to see just enough, not too much, of Sir Robert Martinmas. Besides this, she was continually bothered with suitors for her own hand.

"I believe it would prevent a lot of trouble," she told Miss Aspinwall, "if I went about placarded. 'No husbands need apply' would make a nice sign, and save my saying it."

"You'd have to have something stronger than that," answered her friend.
"Let me see,—it must go like this:

'Gentlemen! Take notice! My complexion is manufactured; my hair is a wig; my gowns are all padded; my smile is automatic; my teeth are false; my fortune has departed.' Nothing less emphatic would save you. And, after all, supposing it worked?" she shook her head lugubriously, "how miserable you would be!"

"I am much more miserable trying to evade idiotic protestations."

"Well, now, why don't you lend an attentive ear to some one of your swains? You have the pick of the city."

"Thank you. I'm not making another marital experiment," said Mrs. Lorraine, coldly.

"But, after all, Helen, every man in town isn't another Dick Lorraine."

"Heaven forbid. But the thought of marriage again is none the less horrible. Those seventeen bound years, Harriet, were enough to last me for eternity."

"And yet you are planning for Laura to marry."

"Rather, I am sure she will marry,

sconer or later. I wish to make the event as little dangerous as may be. By the way, why don't you get married yourself, instead of urging the state on your friends?"

"My dear Helen," drawled Miss Aspinwall, "I never urged any state on any friend. I was merely asking an innocent question. And as for my marrying,—really, I've never quite decided that I approved of a woman popping the question. It doesn't seem exactly to belong to my list of woman's rights. Besides, in spite of springing such a trap on a man, he might have his wits sufficiently about him to escape. And that," she leaned her head back against the crimson chair and sighed deeply, "that would be mortifying for the feminine owner of the trap."

Mrs. Lorraine laughed. "What a fraud you are, Harriet Aspinwall! Just as if I didn't know that there's not a woman in New York who has had more men absolutely mad over her than you have."

"Mad? My dear girl, I have met

plenty of — peculiar men. But really, I never conversed with a mad one in my life. Unless you are referring to that ordinary masculine loss of temper, — which is, I must admit, not rare.”

Mrs. Lorraine scorned to pay any attention. “At this very minute you are keeping poor Tom Dinsmore on the rack, — and for that matter have kept him there for years. If you don’t want him, why don’t you let some other woman have him?”

Miss Aspinwall held up her hands in admiration. “My dear, the rôle of public benefactor is vastly becoming to you. I’ll tell Tom the kindly interest you take in his affairs.”

There was something in the painter’s voice Mrs. Lorraine did not like. “Harriet,” she said, putting her hand on the other’s shoulder, “don’t be feline. I don’t want to interfere in your affairs, Heaven knows. But, — somehow, — Tom has thought so much of you for years, — and you seem so congenial, — why don’t you marry him, Harriet?”

"And this reviler of matrimony willing to immolate her best friend!" mocked Miss Aspinwall. Then, suddenly, she bent her head and kissed the hand on her shoulder, after which she walked over to the fireplace and stood looking into the dancing flames. "Mr. Thomas Dinsmore," she began, very quietly, "has been used to having just what he pleased, all his life. Consequently most things have lost their savour. If by chance there is something he fancies, that remains persistently out of his reach, his taste for it increases. But you can be morally sure that complete attainment would quite destroy his craving for the fruit."

Mrs. Lorraine looked at the slight, curving figure with the well-poised head, silhouetted against the firelight, and a puzzled frown crossed her brow. "If you're comparing a gifted woman and a lifelong friendship to a pomegranate out of reach, I think you do yourself as well as Tom much injustice."

Miss Aspinwall turned with a whirl. "Helen Lorraine, I've known that same

Tom for thirty years. In all that time he's never given me proof either that he'd risk his neck to get the pomegranate or, that, once picked, he'd keep his appetite for it long enough to know its real flavour." She ended abruptly, with a little cynical laugh.

The other's face expressed a plain amaze which did not leave it till long after Miss Aspinwall's departure. "I almost believe," she said to herself at length, "I really almost believe Harriet is in love with him." And something — it was perhaps the wonder of it all — seemed to send a queer ache into her own heart.

"Oh, Mrs. Lorraine," came Jack Wilton's boyish voice at this moment, "may I come in?"

"Indeed you may," she said, with unfeigned pleasure. "I believe you are just in time to drive away a fit of the blues."

"You and the blues!" expostulated Jack, as he deposited a big paper roll on the table. "I can't imagine such a conjunction!"

"There are various things, Sir Knight, that you can't imagine. Wait till you are my age and then see."

"Your age!" Jack threw back his head with a shout. "I'm older than you this minute in everything that makes age." His extremely apparent admiration, as he stood looking at her, made Mrs. Lorraine faintly uneasy.

"What is it this time?" she said, pointing to the roll.

His eyes sparkled. "Mr. Griswold has given me the Tabor contract to do exactly as I please with. Isn't that magnificent! I've brought up some rough outlines of the house to show you. I never dreamed he'd let me do it."

"Griswold has more sense than I credited him with," she said, approvingly.

Something in her face made him look at her keenly. "Did you — did Mr. Griswold — did you make —" he blundered helplessly, while she laughed, tormentingly. "You asked him to let me do it," he blurted, finally, and his listener detected disappointment in the words.

"My dear boy," she put her hand lightly on his arm, "you needn't worry. I never did anything of the kind. Nothing would induce me to ask Mr. Griswold for anything. He's altogether too contrary minded. I've even taken pains not to make too many complimentary remarks about you. Now are you satisfied?" She looked at him teasingly.

"I don't know why you are so good to me," he said, humbly.

"Because I love to look at lines and angles and criss-crosses and all such delightful things on nice white paper. Do hurry up and show me what you have there."

She was thinking of this talk a few nights later at a dinner given by Miss Aspinwall in honour of Amy Tileston's engagement to Arthur Upton. The hostess had whispered before they went into the dining-room, "Do you mind, Helen, if I let Jack Wilton take out Laura?" And Laura's mother smilingly gave her consent to what, a few weeks back, she never would have allowed.

As she looked down the table and noted Laura's sweet, quiet face, expressing just the proper amount of interest, she felt a wave of triumphant satisfaction. How well everything had gone! She really wondered at the ease with which she had accomplished her purpose. That she had so quickly captured Jack was not unexpected. She knew her power over men too well to have felt any serious doubts about that. At the same time, she acknowledged with some amusement, the young architect's homage was of an unusual variety. His admiration was frankly boundless; he continually came to her for advice and sympathy,—nothing he did was quite right without her approval. Yet, she was pretty sure that he had never once lost his head; he was not actually in love with her. It was her vanity, she supposed, that gave a little twinge at this point in her reflections. After all, it was better so. She had grown too fond of the boy to wish to do him any harm. As for Laura,—here things were different. She couldn't get over her

surprise at the way the girl took the whole affair. Sometimes she almost believed that she had misinterpreted Laura's feelings in the beginning. Nothing else seemed to account for her placid acquiescence. Never once since the Van Breen dinner had Mrs. Lorraine seen that tell-tale flush and tremulous smile which so alarmed her then. And yet, she certainly did see them that night. Altogether, Laura's attitude was something of a puzzle. She was inclined to think, however, that her prompt measures had summarily nipped in the bud what would have been a dangerous infatuation.

In the midst of her self-absorption she suddenly became conscious that Mr. Weathersby must have asked her a direct question, of which she had not caught a word.

"Do forgive me," she said, contritely, "those young people at the other end are making so much noise I'm fairly deaf."

"I only remarked that that young Wilton was as fine a fellow as there is in the city. I'm glad to see him with Laura.

You couldn't do better by her, Helen, than to run that into a double-quick match. They're made for each other."

Mrs. Lorraine smiled good-naturedly, wondering, lazily, why old men always said exactly the wrong thing at the wrong time.

"Jack," she said, after dinner, "Mr. Weathersby has been settling your future for you with the calmness of a Hindoo fortune-teller."

The young architect turned suddenly pale and he bent toward her swiftly. "He isn't the one to foretell my future. Mrs. Lorraine," the tense voice paused for a second and she held her breath, she scarcely knew why. "You have been very kind to me these past weeks. So kind that I am going to ask you something I might otherwise never have dared to ask." The colour had not come back to his face. Though his voice did not tremble, he used it carefully, as if the weight of the words might break it.

Unconsciously the young widow half reached her hand to him. With a quick

impulse he took it in both of his and held it tight, while his eyes pleaded bravely.

"May I ask you now?" he whispered.

The slender hand shrank in his eager clasp, and the fair face before him grew very white. For one brief moment Mrs. Lorraine thought she was going to faint. With a gasp she slowly recovered herself and loosed her hand. If there was an unusual gleam of fire in the half-veiled eyes, Jack did not see it.

"Perhaps I know what you would ask," she said, a little unsteadily. "But you must not ask it yet. Wait awhile."

His eyes glowed as he leaned toward her and said, breathlessly, "When, then, Mrs. Lorraine, when?"

"I think," she answered, "I think you may ask me three weeks from to-day."

"And will you say yes?" he cried, trying to take her hand again.

"You have asked it three weeks too soon," she replied.

But as she left him he caught a fleeting backward glance that smiled an affirmative answer.

CHAPTER IX.

WITH her face buried in the soft cushions, Helen Lorraine lay on her couch that evening, for the first time in her life conscious of her full womanhood. She had always taken it for granted that she was incapable of great love. Indeed, she had doubted if, after all, love between man and woman was anything but a sham. She never thought that the very intensity of her loathing for her husband was evidence in itself that her nature could be as deeply stirred by love. But to-night, as she lay prone among the cushions, she knew that she cared for Jack Wilton with an abandonment that thrilled and awed her by its strength and power. The suddenness of this undreamed-of thing made her realise how overwhelming a change had come upon her. Until Jack spoke, she had never thought of caring for him. It

was only when she saw the repressed passion in his eyes and heard his low vibrant voice that, with a shock like a rush of stifling waters, she stood facing her inmost self.

The minutes slipped away into the quarter, the half, the hour, and still she lay there. Time had ceased to be. Alone with her opened heart she drank in with thirsty gasps this new elixir of life and joy. Through her whole being the wonderful, strange sweetness permeated, till from a very awe of happiness she could bear no more. With a sudden surge, the years of dry bitterness and the rubbish of conventionality were swept away; the flood-gates were opened, and Helen Lorraine lay there weeping as she had never wept before.

It seemed hours after that she finally sat up, and forced herself once more to think and plan calmly.

“People will call me a fool,” she said. “A fool for taking the only chance for happiness I have ever had! Oh, Jack!

I never dreamed what would come of my endeavour to keep you from Laura!"

It was the first time she had remembered the child. Some of the radiance in her face paled. With full determination there came back the thought that was only half consciously in her mind when she put Jack off. Laura's future must be settled before she gave her final answer — and herself — to him. One of her reasons for feeling this so strongly was because Sir Robert Martinmas was soon to leave the city. She was not altogether pleased with the progress of affairs between him and Laura. She suspected that she would have to use all her tact and management to bring things to a satisfactory state before his departure. Her own head she knew must be clear and cool during the next few weeks. "And I'm afraid," she said to herself, with a little ecstatic thrill, "that there might be some doubt of that clear-headedness if Jack knew the truth." Underneath all was the thought that till Laura was safely provided for she could not take her own

happiness. She instinctively felt that it would be easier for the girl not to hear of her mother's engagement until she herself was provided for. To give herself as free a mind and hand as possible she determined to see very little of Jack for the next three weeks. She would devote her entire time and energies to bringing Laura and the baronet together.

The pale flush of the dawn had almost turned to the brilliance of full morning when she finally prepared for bed. Then as sleep slipped over her tired eyelids, all plans and questions fled. Into the tissue of her dreams were woven the golden threads that Love alone knows how to spin.

During the following two weeks Helen Lorraine lived in a world of throbbing happiness. She revelled with a joyous abandon in the hitherto unsuspected depths of her own nature. Where a younger and more happily inexperienced woman would have said, "He loves me," she thought oftener, "I love him." That

she could so love, fairly flooded her soul with its own delight.

Meanwhile she bent all her efforts toward hurrying a settlement between Laura and Sir Robert. He proved tractable, but not precisely in the way she desired. Though he showed a real fondness for Laura, she sometimes suspected that it was herself he preferred for wife. Withal he was not quick at getting new ideas or changing his mind once it was made up! Very deftly and skilfully she worked with him, till, at the end of a rather venturesome interview, she believed she had accomplished her object.

"My one aim in life," she finally dared tell him, "is to see Laura happily married. Nothing counts with me now, or can count, till that is an assured fact."

And the baronet flushed and betrayed an unexpected pleasure in her words. So much so, indeed, that she wondered with some amusement what he had thought before.

"He couldn't have supposed the opposite, could he?" she said to herself, a



"MY ONE AIM IN LIFE . . . IS TO SEE LAURA
HAPPILY MARRIED"

little grimly, “that Laura was not obtainable till her mother was disposed of?”

However, it really did not matter if he at last comprehended. It was shortly after this that she began to sound Laura.

“How do you like Sir Robert?” she asked, tentatively.

“He’s just as nice as he can be,” said Laura, with gratifying enthusiasm. “I like him almost as well as Mr. Weathersby.”

Mrs. Lorraine looked nettled at this ending. “I can’t see why you compare him with Mr. Weathersby.”

“Oh, well, they’re both very kind and polite to me, just as if I had been grown up a good many years ago, and they are both old —”

“Laura Lorraine! Sir Robert is barely my age! Mr. Weathersby is old enough to be his father, with abundant years to spare.”

“Yes, I suppose he is,” said Laura, reflectively. “Only somehow Mr. Weathersby seems young for his age and

Sir Robert old for his. So it sort of makes them meet."

Mrs. Lorraine, exasperated, tried another tack. "The baronet wouldn't be greatly flattered if he knew your opinion. He doesn't consider there is any insurmountable difference between his age and yours."

Even Laura felt that that last sentence hid some ulterior meaning. She looked at her mother with a slightly amazed expression. "I don't know what you mean," she said, slowly. "Why should he think about my age at all?"

Her mother laughed carelessly. "Well, my dear, unless I am greatly mistaken Sir Robert Martinmas is decidedly interested in you."

"Interested!" There was a hint of trouble in the girl's eyes. "How interested? He's only just polite and kind."

"Such especial politeness from an Englishman as he has shown to you is generally indicative of but one thing."

"You mean," Laura's face flushed

swiftly, “that he would like to marry me?”

“I shall be surprised if he doesn’t tell me that before many days.” Her tone expressed complete satisfaction.

“Mother!” The trouble in the big gray eyes had almost grown to terror. “You can’t think it! He doesn’t! Why, he thinks of me like a daughter. He’s never said a word to suggest any such dreadful thing.” It was not often that Laura’s sentences followed one another so recklessly.

Mrs. Lorraine felt uncomfortable. “No well-bred Englishman would let you know his wishes before he had spoken to me.”

“But you *must* be mistaken! Why,—if he’s in love with anybody, it’s you!” She brightened as the idea came to her. “He certainly talks about you pretty nearly all the time.”

The young widow remembered her satisfactory conversation with Sir Robert, and smiled contentedly. “Possibly that

is because *you* talk of me and he follows your lead."

"Well," said Laura, with sudden acuteness, "if I talk of you, it's because I don't know anything else that interests him. Certainly I wouldn't feel that way with a man who was in love with me."

Mrs. Lorraine was more nonplussed than she admitted. She almost feared that Laura was going to prove refractory. Outwardly, however, she remained undisturbed as ever. "Well, my dear, we shall soon see who is right."

Then she gently lifted the grave young face, and looked tenderly into the wide, worried eyes.

"It isn't anything to feel unhappy about, girlie. Personally, I could not wish you better than to be the wife of such a man as Sir Robert."

And to Laura, who knew her mother's way of stating a wish, that was practically a command. There was no doubt now that, as the older woman left her, there was unhidden terror in her face and attitude.

Mrs. Lorraine was certainly not well pleased with the result of her conversation. She knew, of course, that if the worst came, she would merely have to lay decided orders upon the girl. But now, when she herself was so filled with radiant joy, she could not bear to think of making Laura unhappy.

"But I know her too well to doubt her final content," she assured herself. "There is nothing of the wildly romantic about her. Once married to Sir Robert, it wouldn't be a month before she was as sweetly satisfied as if she had always longed for the union."

Up to this time she had followed her plan of keeping away from Jack. For the first week it was easy enough. She hardly wanted to see him. It was as much as she could bear to feel the marvellous happiness in her own heart. Gradually, however, as the strangeness of it all was forgotten in its great sweetness, there grew a tender longing to tell her love. Once she almost betrayed herself. A day or so after her talk with Laura she met Jack

on the street. She saw him first, otherwise he might have surprised the shining greeting that flashed over her face at sight of him. He looked distinctly troubled, but brightened visibly as she came up.

"I was going to see you this very day," he exclaimed. "You've persistently avoided me ever since—"

She held up her hand, and laughed,— a tender, rippling laugh that ought to have comforted the most worried of men. "I'm going to continue to shun you for two weeks more. And you mustn't write. I won't read a word."

"But, dear Mrs. Lorraine," still with doubt and perplexity, "you ought to know—I can't endure it—really—do you understand?"

And the woman suddenly longed to tell him all,— how well indeed she did understand. For a minute it was almost beyond her power to keep her self-control. "A little while," she promised herself, "just a little while longer." "Jack," she said, aloud, "you haven't much patience. You must cultivate it. Two weeks will

give you chance for practice." She was gone, leaving him only the memory of a brilliant, heavenly smile.

He looked after her dazed. He almost felt that he was in the midst of some mystery. "Oh, well," he shook himself, irritably, "I won't believe things are going wrong. She is too lovely and sweet and gracious. Things can't go wrong."

CHAPTER X.

THINGS can't go wrong," sang Helen Lorraine, also. She was in that state of triumphant joy where defeat seems absolutely impossible. Even the unexpected absence of the baronet just at this critical moment did not greatly trouble her. It was annoying, to be sure, for she realised that there was little enough time for him to press matters with Laura. On the other hand, perhaps, the child would learn his worth better while he was away.

"Fate can't be unkind to me now," cried the young widow, exultantly. "Surely the gods are with me. The whole world's with me."

No wonder people began to look at her with increasing amazement. Though her tongue kept the secret, the ecstasy was shining in her eyes, flushing her cheeks,

curving her lips, — fairly flaunting itself before all who cared to read.

Mr. Thomas Dinsmore one afternoon was studying her with deep interest. He had dropped into her drawing-room on his way up-town, and feeling in a rather low mood, he seized the opportunity for some diversion.

“Helen,” he said, shaking hands, solemnly, “what’s all this feverish excitement for? Why does your hand tremble? What’s that glisten in your eye? Why is your head thrown up like the hunted deer? Come, pour out your soul to a truly sympathising breast!”

Mrs. Lorraine pulled her hand from his still detaining clasp. “Yes, you always were that, dear Tommy! Way back in the days when you held my pet doll to the fire to see it melt in streaks. And when you got me to drink your horrible decoction of vinegar and molasses and Mrs. Winslow’s Soothing Syrup, under the belief that it would make my legs grow so I could run faster than Harriet!

Oh, yes! You have always been sympathy itself."

" You malign me," he began, with great dignity.

She laughed gleefully, and turned upon him with glowing eyes. " Tom, dear, isn't it a beautiful world?"

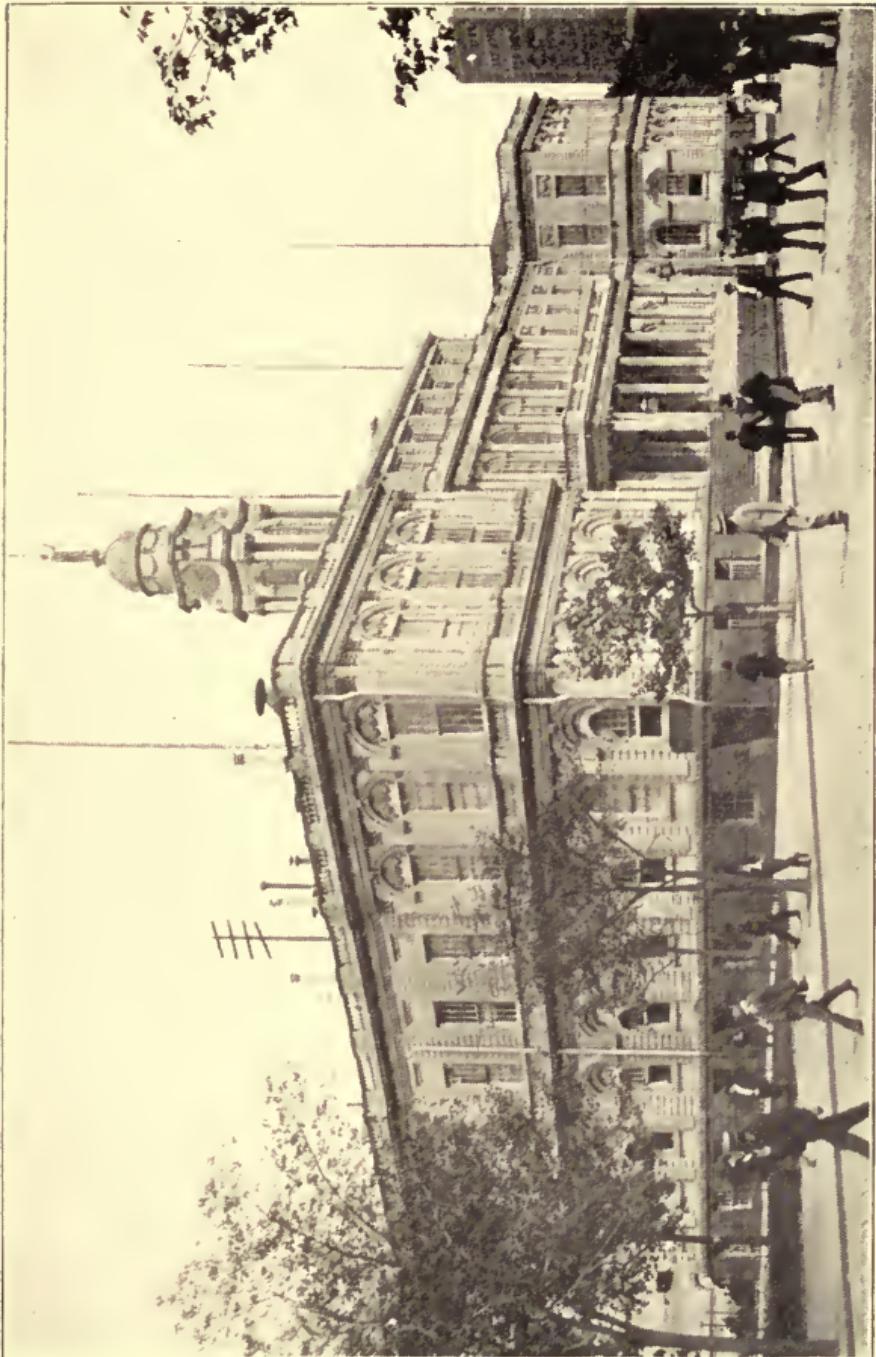
" Poor thing! Poor thing!" He shook his head, mournfully. " So young and beautiful to be so afflicted!"

" You great — goose!" She regained her self-possession in high dudgeon at what might have been her own betrayal.

" Yes," said the attacked, " that's what they have been calling me all day at City Hall. The appellation was different, but the meaning was identical."

" City Hall! What were you in City Hall for?"

Mr. Dinsmore shrugged his shoulders. " Result of a fit of idiocy. Judge Emery came down to the kennels the other day to pick out a dog. So he said. I didn't observe that he did anything but pour out a story of a poor devil of a Frenchman who was going to have suit brought against



CITY HALL

him. Seems there's one of our irreproachable city officials who wants the little corner fruit store of Frenchy. Plans to turn it into a rumshop for one of his henchmen. Judge allowed that unless Frenchy got rather different counsel than he could afford, he'd be ousted; and he swore that would be an outrage. And — well, he actually wheedled me into promising to take Frenchy's case." He ended with a whimsical, shamefaced expression.

"Judge Emery is a dear!" declared Mrs. Lorraine. "And you needn't talk about being wheedled. You are probably having a better time than you ever had in your life!"

He smiled affably. "It's to be hoped my client won't hear I haven't had a case for over five years. He might lose the profound faith he at present possesses in my powers. I tell you what," he added, with huge appreciation, "I've been giving those Hibernian satellites of the Lord Boss a lively hunt to-day. They finally decided they might as well produce at

once any documents and reports I am after. The dirty blackguards! They'll have the pleasure of paying for their own suit this time, or I've lost all the law that ever trickled into my cranium."

Tom Dinsmore actually roused over something besides dogs or horses! Mrs. Lorraine fairly held her breath, and then she turned to him impulsively.

"Harriet will be overwhelmed with delight. She'll never say you nay after this."

"Evidently you haven't gauged Harriet's capacity for employing that objectionable negative." His tone was dry enough, but his listener thought it pathetic.

"Tom," she said again, and stopped in confusion.

"Helen," he mocked, tragically, "what is it?" Her nervousness struck him as divertingly unusual.

She paid no attention to his manner. With her eyes anywhere but on his face, she started once more.

" You'll think I'm too outrageous. But I want to ask you something. I — I think I can help you." She turned and looked at him pleadingly.

" Thank you. Go ahead. You can't be outrageous." He was gravely courteous now, though he certainly began to feel a bit uncomfortable.

" No one need ever know, but, on your soul, Tom, how much do you care for Harriet?" The words at last came tumultuously, and she stood gazing at him as if her own life depended on his answer.

The man's face flushed darkly. Then, in spite of derisive astonishment at himself, and the whole situation, he answered, quietly, " I don't know, Helen. How can one measure what has been part of one so long that it is impossible to tell which is you and which is it?"

" Then — why don't you marry her?"

He winced, but laughed shortly. " Third act of the melodrama. My dear girl, I have spent the best part of my life trying to persuade her that that

should be the legitimate outcome of our squabbles."

" You've squabbled too long. You never should have tried to persuade her, either. There's too much of the spirit of the middle ages in her. You ought to have taken her by main force long ago."

Mr. Dinsmore almost sneered. " Even granting my very doubtful power, I've an idea it mightn't be so satisfactory afterwards — with a bushwhacked wife."

" Bushwhacked! It certainly is amazing how long you men can have your eyes open without ever really seeing! You don't imagine that any actual force could compel her to your arms for good, do you? I simply meant that her strain of mediævalism demands at least a show of masterfulness. In spite of her modern veneer of independence and all the rest, in her heart she doubts the reality of a passion that accepts a verbal no as ultimatum."

This time he laughed without scorn.
" Since we have come to such personali-

ties, you may as well hear that she hasn't the slightest idea that I've taken any 'no as ultimatum.' But it doesn't make my chances more hopeful for her to know that I'm likely to repeat the same old question any day."

"Don't repeat it. Make a grand dash in an entirely different way. That's why I was so delighted to hear of your Frenchman."

"I know. But I don't see the connection."

"I can't help it if I am betraying forty confidences!" She went up to him swiftly and put her hand on his arm. "Tom, dear, prove to her that you are dead in earnest about any one thing in this world, and then claim her for your own with all the power that's in you!"

The fire in her eyes made the man marvel even while his own kindled answeringly. He seized the hand that trembled on his arm and kissed it.

"You're very good to a no-account fool, Helen. And if you are right," he did not realise how he crushed the hand

in his grasp, “the gods should have enough pity for a man who’s thrown away half his years to give him a show at last.”

BROAD WALK, CENTRAL PARK



CHAPTER XI.

MISS ASPINWALL was curled up on the window-seat in her studio. Looking down on to the tops of the bare trees massed at that end of the park into a maze of twisting branches, she was idly watching the shifting sunlight that weaved a changing golden pattern over the gray woof of knotted twigs. From her height she could see that even in their leafless state the branches criss-crossed so thickly that only a few thread-like gleams worked through to the street below. Miss Aspinwall shook her head. She knew too well the state of that street. The Reform Club and the Street Cleaning Department had recently had a collision, and the Department had, of course, been victorious.

“Dirty old black pavements,” she scolded, half aloud. “And respectable human beings are forced to put up with

such outrageous accommodations for their peregrinations. If the Creator knew we were to live in such mire he might at least have furnished the more fastidious of us with wings! Birds can keep their feet clean and their noses away from smells. It's the usual fair distribution of 'Divine Providence.'" Talking to herself was Miss Aspinwall's way of turning on a safety-valve that saved her friends and relations many an uncomfortable quarter-hour. "It's no wonder we are such miserable, grovelling creatures," she went on, savagely. "What else could be expected when most of our lives are spent hardly six feet above dirt-level?"

The big knocker on the studio hall door dropped with a clang, and without taking the trouble to change her position, she called, "Come in," rather ungraciously.

The door opened slowly, while Mr. Thomas Dinsmore assured himself by a leisurely survey that the figure on the window-seat was the only occupant of the room.

"Well, this is comfortable," he said,

genially. "The gods are evidently with me to-day."

"They've left you before now, then," retorted Miss Aspinwall. "You'd better go home. I'm cross and blue, and we'll only fight if you stay."

"Oh, no, we won't!" said Mr. Dinsmore, placidly. "It still takes at least two for that, and Beelzebub himself couldn't get a rise out of me just now."

"Such complimentary insinuations are well calculated to put the other party into an equally pleasant frame of mind," said the lady, tartly.

"Now, Harriet," gently remonstrated he, in the aggravating tone of one who quite realises how exemplary is his amiability, "we are *not* going to quarrel. If you really want to get rid of me, I'll go at once." He made what was apparently an attempt to stifle a sigh, and stood looking dolefully into his hat.

The sigh or the attitude accomplished its purpose. Miss Aspinwall unbent sufficiently to command him to sit down and be sensible, if he could. He accepted the

permission with due humility, while he inwardly wondered how in the world he could propitiously introduce the object of his call. For once, however, the gods did seem to be favourable. As he settled himself at the other end of the long window, the newspaper stuck into his pocket dropped to the floor.

"If it's this evening's," she said, as he stooped to pick it up, "please pass it over. I want to see if the Tombs' case came up before Judge Emery to-day."

The first thing her eyes lighted upon, however, was not the Tombs case. Instead the heading ran, "Boss McGlynn Defeated. A Brilliant Début in the Legal Ring of one of Gotham's Society Leaders. Judge Emery's Scathing Denunciation."

"What's this?" she exclaimed, "McGlynn actually routed?" Skipping here and there, she read aloud the column that followed: "'It is not often that a foreigner, with nothing on his side but right, succeeds in our municipal courts in winning a suit against one of our bosses. It is cause for public congratulation that

Jacques Ribout did succeed. Ribout is legitimate proprietor of the little fruit store that McGlynn had determined should be a rumshop for his hopeful son-in-law O'Geary. . . . It was the old story of intimidation, suppression of evidence, and perjury. . . . As the case was tried before Judge Emery there was certainty of the justice of the bench's decision. But without a skilful and not-to-be-bulldozed lawyer, it is sure that even Judge Emery's capacity for detecting fraud would have been strained to its utmost. Such a lawyer Ribout, luckily, had. And it may as well be said right here that New York's courts have seldom witnessed a more able or more brilliantly conducted case. . . . Ribout's lawyer, in his search for documents and evidence, had some lively tussles with our convict-rumshop-political government. We are credibly informed that in consequence of his experience his assistance may be counted upon in any fight against the corruption that makes the city a synonym for every kind of legal as well as moral dishonour. . . . It may

interest some to know that this suddenly to the front young lawyer is the son of one of New York's most valued citizens, — a man whose death ten years ago came like a public calamity, — Doctor Thomas Dinsmore.’”

The paper dropped from Miss Aspinwall’s hands. “Tom Dinsmore! — You?” The words were hardly more than a gasp. She sat staring with an expression which the man found extremely disconcerting. It made him want to laugh, but it also sent a queer lump into his throat. And then he wondered what would happen if, willy-nilly, he should take her into his arms. On the whole, perhaps, it was not an entirely propitious moment.

“That fire reporter,” he said, blandly, before the painter had recovered the use of her breath, “has dramatic instincts that deserve cultivation. If I were the editor — ”

“Don’t.” She slipped from her end of the seat and stood beside him. “Tom, is it true? Was it really you?” The glow

in her eyes, along with that bewitching tremor in her voice, almost finished Mr. Thomas Dinsmore.

With a mental shake he succeeded in keeping his outward calmness. "Well, my dear," he counted on her preoccupation to linger deliciously over the term, "I suppose, with some allowance for hyperbole born of enthusiasm, the youth in the main told the truth."

"Oh, then, — why — why didn't you," her voice trailed off into a weak little gulp, and at the same time an unmistakable round drop rolled down each cheek.

Mr. Dinsmore gazed at those two shining globules with an awed fascination that petrified him into losing his opportunity. For, while he was still speechless, she who had generated those drops turned her back upon him and tried to wipe away all traces of their fall.

"Considering everything," she said, with as much dignity as a rather muffled voice could carry, "you might have told

me before. I should have liked to hear your speech."

"Oh, if that's all," said Mr. Dinsmore, coolly, though inwardly raging at the way he had wasted his chance, "you haven't lost anything. With the exception of certain concrete details and examples, the whole speech was your own property."

"Thomas Dinsmore! What rubbish!"

"The judge and the public didn't so consider it. As for its being yours,—these many years I have listened in meek receptiveness to your tirades against the wickedness and filth that dwell in the high places of this town. Therefore, when my opening came for declamation against these honourable gentlemen who occupy these positions, what could I do? How could I help using your material, so to speak? You hadn't left a spot uncovered. There was only one reason," he concluded, succinctly, at the same time placing himself where he looked straight into her eyes, "only one reason why I didn't truthfully and publicly acknowledge my indebtedness."

“Which was?” Somehow the painter’s eyes dropped. “Though it’s all perfect nonsense,” she added, turning sharply away.

“It’s very far from nonsense. It’s the only serious, sober fact in this whole crazy world. And hear it you shall this time, whether you like or not.” There was no mistaking the ring of triumph. Miss Aspinwall’s cheeks grew queerly white, and she longed helplessly for escape, from what she hardly knew.

“The reason is simply this.” With a quick, indescribable movement, he leaned forward and down. And Harriet Aspinwall found all ways of escape cut off. A strong pair of arms crushed her tight against a breast whose tumultuous heaving gave the lie direct to its owner’s paraded nonchalance.

“Tom!” The indignation ended in a sob, though she struggled violently to free herself.

The arms only held her closer, while the man’s face bent down to hers. “I’ll never let you go unless you’ll promise to

come back. Harriet! I've loved you ever since you were ten. You tyrannised over me then and you've kept it up pretty steadily ever since. But now you'll stay right where you are till you promise to take me for better, for worse, — for good and all."

During these pugnacious sentences, to his own exceeding surprise, not a sound came from his captive. Her face was hidden against his coat so that all he could see was a little pink ear and a three-cornered piece of a cheek most tantalisingly soft.

"Harriet! Sweetheart!" His bravado left him as he whispered the words into that little pink ear. "I love you with all my heart and soul and body, and —" with a half laugh and a half choke — "I'm going to kiss you this minute."

Before his moustache had more than brushed her cheek, with a sudden wrench she threw up her head. A wave of pink had flooded her from forehead to throat, but she looked at him from eyes at last

all unafraid to show their depths of tenderness.

“ You don’t have to *steal*,” she began, and then — words were out of the question.

“ You haven’t asked me,” said Mr. Dinsmore, considerably later, “ why I didn’t acknowledge from whom I cribbed my speech.”

“ Didn’t wish to make yourself a laughing-stock, I suppose.”

“ Not at all. I simply had a natural delicacy about flaunting my wife’s brilliant attainments in public.”

“ O — oh!” She wriggled herself free. “ Of all assurance! I should like to know how, after all these years, you so suddenly grew to such valiancy!”

Mr. Dinsmore chuckled. “ I might reply with more truth than ever justified Adam, ‘ The woman, she did it.’ Though doubtless Tammany helped to screw my courage to its present sticking point. Even you weren’t so formidable after I’d pulled the Tiger’s tail!”

“ Well,” replied the woman who had

succumbed, "all I've got to say is that if you'd tried the combination ten, yes, or fifteen years ago, you might have saved us both a great many premarital squabbles."

CHAPTER XII.

IT had been the kind of day that often comes to New York in what seems to be nature's pause between the last sigh of winter and the first breath of spring. Although the varnished brown buds of the maples in the city squares were not yet streaked with crimson; though even the willows in the park still showed hardly a hint of gold along their whiplike tips; yet, all day the air had been full of a thousand subtle suggestions of May herself. The sky's winter pallor had deepened almost to summer's blue; the dull gray clouds had softened into filmy puffs that drifted lazily high overhead; the sunlight, no longer thin and white, swept yellow heat between the city blocks; an adventurous robin or two appeared with swelling breast and pompously disputed the sparrows' winter-vested rights in the pickings of Washing-

ton Square; the carts and trucks rattled and banged over the pavements, but their wheels had lost the brittle snapping of frosty days; florists opened their doors, and the perfume of jonquil, daffodil, and crocus, mixed with the thicker fragrance of violet and rose, was wafted like an intangible breath of the sunny south all up and down the avenue. To-morrow, again, likely enough, the sky would be gray, the clouds leaden, the sun dimmed, and a piercing wind straight down the Hudson from the frozen Adirondacks would be shrieking around the corners and flicking the dust into veritable whirl-pools of nauseous sand. Which probability, Helen Lorraine admitted to herself, as she looked out at the lights on the Madison Square Garden tower, where Diana's bow swept the darkened sky, perhaps only gave more reason for rejoicing in to-day!

As a rule, to be sure, the young widow gave attention to the weather only when it was bad. But lately, somehow, she had grown strangely susceptible to all



MADISON SQUARE GARDEN

sorts of things she used never to notice. She wondered why it was that the heavy clouds of yesterday, which the setting sun had rimmed with gold and crimson and purple, sent such a thrill through her? What was there about the mellow sunshine to-day that flooded her heart with some of its own glamour? She pressed her hands to her breast. There was no need for explanation. She was in the midst of an enchanted spell. She had but to think the name of “Jack” to be filled with the rapture and joy of sun and spring and flowers and perfume.

But it was getting very hard to keep the rapture all to herself. Thank Heaven there were only three more days! Then he was to come for the answer she had promised. And then — would she tell him how she had longed to shorten those three weeks of waiting? How it was only by sedulously avoiding him altogether that she had held her secret from him? She laughed softly now, as she acknowledged that it was fortunate for her own self-respect that there were to be only

three more days of the struggle. She would hardly answer for herself if the time was much longer. It was even lucky that these three days were to be too full of other matters to give her much time for brooding over her own feelings. She picked up the note she had received that afternoon from Sir Robert Martinmas.

“ My dear Mrs. Lorraine,” it ran, “ I was sorry to have to leave the city immediately after our last conversation. I cannot tell you how much your words meant to me. But, perhaps, with your woman’s intuition, you can guess how long the days have seemed before I could come to you,—daring to put my great hope to the test. I venture to believe that I can assure you of your daughter’s happiness. Will you not give me a chance to earn my own? I shall be in New York on Saturday. May I see you Sunday afternoon? ”

The letter slipped from her hand as she sank back into the big chair. She was going to write him to come. It was

a pity it was the day after, instead of the day before she had agreed to see Jack. She hated not to have Laura's future definitely settled before she herself was committed irretrievably. However, a day made very little difference, providing she could be sure of the girl's acquiescence. It was this uncertainty which troubled her more than she was willing to admit. They had not discussed the baronet since that first time. But she felt that nothing had happened to give Laura any stronger interest in him. Apparently his absence had not made her appreciate his worth, nor had she seemed to miss him in the least. It was certainly provoking enough, but she did not doubt the final outcome. She only wished it could be more spontaneous. As things were, there was nothing for her to do but to tell Laura her desires plainly, and to try to make her realise the happiness she would find as Sir Robert's wife. She devoutly hoped they would have no kind of a "fuss." The very thought of such a possibility made her feel that she ought to begin her

preparations at once. With this decision, a moment later she was knocking at Laura's door.

Flat on the white fur rug before the fire, her hair pulled down and rippling over the soft white kimono, her chin on her hands, her elbows on her knees, sat Laura, who hardly moved as she called, "Come in."

She jumped to her feet at her mother's entrance, and then proceeded to pull her down beside her.

"I thought it was Walker. You're the prettiest mother in the world in that rose wrapper," she said, holding the older woman off by the shoulders, while she gazed at her admiringly.

"What a mutual admiration party!" laughed Mrs. Lorraine. "I was just wishing Sir Robert could see how lovely you looked with all that white fluff about you."

Laura drew back at the mention of the baronet. "Sir Robert would never look at me once with you here, too," she said, forcing a lightness into her voice.

Mrs. Lorraine came to a swift conclusion. This beating about the bush was both useless and aggravating. "My dear," she leaned over and gently put her arm about Laura, "there is no use in our hedging any more. Sir Robert Martinmas is coming Sunday to ask me for your hand."

"Mother!" It was not a cry. The word was scarcely breathed, yet Helen Lorraine suddenly suspected that there might be unthought of capacity for suffering behind that frightened whisper.

She shook off the impression, and went on evenly. "It can't be such a surprise to you, Laura. You must have understood his attentions could mean nothing else."

"I never did, I never did!" She was sobbing now, and her mother felt much the helplessness of a man who sees a woman in tears. Laura almost never cried. "He never has paid me such attention. It's just as I told you before. He hasn't said or done half the things ever so many other men have, and I'm

sure *they* didn't mean anything." She had choked back the sobs, but her face, as she raised it, was piteous in its entreaty.

"My dear little girl! *Why* do you feel so badly? Whether he has acted like other men or not, he is in love with you, and wants to marry you. And it seems to me you ought to be very proud and happy."

"You — you — are going to tell him he can have me?" The hopeless ache in the voice went straight to the mother's heart. It was evidently going to be harder than she had expected.

"My dear, *you* are going to want to have him. What possible objection can you have? Surely you don't think I would urge you to marry him unless he was worthy of you?"

Laura threw both arms round her mother's neck. "I know you mean it for my good. But, mother, — I don't love him."

Mrs. Lorraine remembered with a pang how another girl had appealed to her

mother, nearly twenty years ago. But the cases were so different!

"You like him and respect him," she said, soothingly. "He is everything that is fine. Even if you didn't like him as well as you do, I should be sure you would learn to care for him. What could you possibly ask for that he has not?"

"Oh, I don't know!" Laura sprang to her feet and stood with tight clasped hands. "I don't know!" she repeated, wearily. "He's good and kind and handsome. I do like him. I think I'd love him as a father. But, now — oh, mother! I should *die* to have him come very near me. I couldn't stand it if he kissed me." The last words were hardly audible, and her cheeks grew red with shame.

Mrs. Lorraine walked over to the window and looked out into the night. It was more, much more unpleasant, than she had feared it would be. But it was all so senseless that it was irritating, too. Nevertheless there was nothing but soft kindness in her voice as she turned to the drooping girl.

"If that is all, Laura, it doesn't mean anything. Many young girls feel that way at first. If you really like him as you say, you needn't worry about anything else. The rest will come in its own good time. It isn't necessary, either," she smiled a little cynically, "that you should spend much time kissing, you know."

"Oh, mother! Don't!" Laura shrank as if she had been struck. "You know I didn't mean that. But to marry a man, to have to live with him day after day, all your life, when you don't care if you never see him from one month's end to another.—when the very thought of being near him makes you shudder—Oh!—is that what a marriage should be?"

It was the mother's turn to shudder. To what was she condemning the child? Was her own wedded life to be duplicated in her daughter's? She threw off the thought angrily. Could any one be more unlike Dick Lorraine than Sir Robert Martinmas? It was all perfectly pre-

posturous. And would be more so if a mere whim of a sensitive schoolgirl was allowed to ruin all her future life.

"You don't know what you are saying," she said, finally, with the cool determination Laura knew so well. "If you could not be happy with Sir Robert, certainly you could not be with any man. Believe your mother, my dear. I know you better than you know yourself. Once married you will wonder how you could ever have felt as you do now. Do you think I would urge you into it if I didn't *know*? Have I ever failed to do what was best for you? It is the first time my daughter has ever disputed her mother's wishes."

Laura choked at the reproach. "Mother, dear!" She held out her hands imploringly. "Oh, if you knew! It is breaking my heart. How can I marry a man I do not even care for?"

As Mrs. Lorraine took the fluttering little hands, the girl's control gave way entirely. Burying her face on her

mother's breast, she broke into a very passion of tears.

"My dear! My dear!" The elder woman drew her gently to the couch and sat with her arms about her till the outburst had spent itself. By that time nature claimed its right to repair damages. Almost before she knew it the girl had fallen into a deep sleep.

Helen Lorraine went back to her own room, more depressed than she would have believed possible. She was nonplussed at this phase in Laura's character. In spite of herself, she began to think that she had never sounded the depths of the nature she supposed she knew so well. Then, as she thought of the ease with which the paroxysm of grief had ended, she tried to reassure herself. No great intensity of feeling, she reasoned, could so quickly become oblivious. Nevertheless, the memory of the girl's face and words haunted her all night. For the first time for nearly three weeks she hardly thought of Jack at all.

In the morning, however, her own hap-

piness swept over her again with all its sweet poignancy, and once more any kind of failure seemed incredible. She read Sir Robert's note over with a vivid mental picture of the man himself before her. Who else could compare with him? She said to herself with a tender smile that even Jack was not his equal. Not that it mattered in the least to *her*. But it was positively ridiculous to imagine that Laura would not learn to love such a man. She couldn't be doing wrong to insist upon the marriage. Why, any other girl in New York would fairly sell her soul to be the baronet's choice.

With these fortifying thoughts she was able to view calmly Laura's pale face and drooping eyes. She concluded that she would not mention the matter again till just before Sir Robert's appearance.

CHAPTER XIII.

S far as Laura's feelings were concerned, it was not at all necessary that anything more should be said. She knew her mother's wish as perfectly as if they had talked a month. And a wish with her was tantamount to an accomplished command. Bitterly enough she realised that nothing she could say would ever change her mother's mind. That she might after all defy her and refuse to do her bidding was a remote contingency that hardly occurred to her. She was too sure that no puny rebellion of hers could weaken her mother's iron will. It was settled that she was to marry Sir Robert. Though that was a horror too dreadful for belief, she saw no way to prevent it. Meanwhile, her face, in spite of Herculean efforts on her part, grew hourly whiter and more drawn.

After that first wretched breakfast,

Mrs. Lorraine, who was overwhelmed with social duties at this end of the season, seldom saw Laura alone. Otherwise perhaps that grief-stricken face might have worked havoc with her plans.

If she was thus both purposely and incidentally blind, it was different with Miss Aspinwall. The artist had not yet announced her engagement to Mr. Dinsmore.

“I propose to get used to the thing a bit myself,” she informed her lover, “before I give the world permission to stare and guy and oversee.”

Greatly to her own amazement, she discovered that somehow, during these first few weeks, it was extremely difficult to settle down to any kind of work. She did not hint this state of affairs to Mr. Dinsmore. Instead, she vigorously applauded his new-born energy in digging into some of the political slums. For very pride’s sake he was obliged to stay down-town a reasonable number of hours a day. These were the hours that she found unaccountably hard to fill. She would start on a

sketch, only to throw her brushes down in despair at the mess she made. Reading was equally out of the question. The only relief was to walk. So walk she did,— all over the city and into the country, taking care not to venture near the regions where Mr. Dinsmore might be expected to appear.

On one of these tramps she had gone way up Riverside Drive, past Grant's Tomb, straight up,— nearly opposite to the Palisades. It was a favourite spot with the painter, and for awhile she stood on the high, rocky embankment, looking across old Hendrik's majestic stream. Her eye for once scarcely appreciated the charms of the place. The vast quiet, that seemed eternally settled upon the rugged, forbidding cliffs, never suggested the nearness of the heart of the thundering metropolis. It was of this, however, that she was thinking. She could almost see the grimy, crowded, noisy city, far down under the curling smoke that rose high over the huge, indeterminate mass of walls, chimneys, and roofs. But from

where she stood, the softening glamour of the haze that distance throws so euphemistically, made it hard to believe in the reality of those narrow, dark, reeking streets. Yet it was in one of those streets, in all probability, where was at that moment a very precious somebody. And then Miss Aspinwall laughed.

"If one escapes such idiocy at twenty, it's apparently only to be more demented at thirty-five."

She turned and retraced her way, still in a blissful, half-unnoticing state. She did not even look up when she came into one of those cross streets of upper New York where rows of cheaply ostentatious brownstone apartment houses end abruptly against piles of sprawling boulders. Here, fastened to the rocks like clinging barnacles, were the low, gray hovels, once so plentiful in the advance guard of Harlem's population. There were the usual heaps of refuse, the scattered tin cans and bottles, the lines of flapping clothes, the scraggy hens and the ubiquitous goat. Here, too, was the un-

washed, harlequin clothed youngster, who, as he tore the hair or cuffed the cheeks of his infant neighbour, seemed on the whole to be in a state of physical thriving.

More than half-preoccupied and short-sighted as she was, Miss Aspinwall came to full knowledge of her surroundings most unexpectedly. Without previous warning she found herself in the midst of half a dozen riotous vagabonds, yelling and dancing in front of a young lady who was apparently wholly unconscious of everything about her.

“For heaven’s sake, child!” Miss Aspinwall almost screamed in her surprise.
“What on earth are you doing here?”

At the first sound of the voice behind them the imps had scuttled to the rocks, and she stood alone, facing Laura Lorraine.

“Oh, Aunt Harriet!” Laura nearly fell on to the painter’s outstretched arm.
“I—I’m so glad to see you! I believe—I wasn’t feeling very well.”

Miss Aspinwall tightened her grasp.
“Judging from appearances,” she said,

dryly, "I should say you weren't. Did those rascals frighten you? What are you walking for? Where's the carriage?"

"No, they didn't bother me. I haven't been driving. I—I thought it would do me good to walk."

"You haven't walked here from your house!"

Laura nodded with indifferent weariness.

"Child alive! You're miles from home! And with a face like that! It's a wonder an ambulance hasn't picked you up before this. What in the world were you proposing to do, anyway?"

"I—don't know. I just wanted to get away."

Miss Aspinwall paid no heed to the tone of heavy despair. "Well, I should say you had got there. Which being the case, it's quite time you started back home. And, actually, there's the means of transportation." She hailed a passing cab as she spoke. "Unheard-of luck in this God-forsaken region."

"Oh, don't!" Laura clutched her arm. "I can't go home, Aunt Harriet! I can't."

"You needn't," said Miss Aspinwall, successfully concealing her astonishment at the words, and at the same time assisting the girl into the coupé. "I'll take you straight to the studio, where you won't even see sympathising Aunt Harmon."

"I'm an awful trouble to you," murmured Laura, sinking into a corner of the seat. "But — but, my head aches so badly I really can't talk to anybody." She was thankful that that at least was strict truth.

"Don't you worry," said Miss Aspinwall, cheerfully. "I was going there, anyway, and it's too far to walk. When we get there you shall have a cup of tea that will send your headache flying."

There was just a comfortable amount of friendly, uncurious solicitude in her voice, and Laura thankfully settled back against the arm that somehow found its way behind her. Hardly a word more

"I CAN'T GO HOME, AUNT HARRIET! I CAN'T!"



was spoken till she was tucked cosily up on the window-seat overlooking the park.

“There,” said Miss Aspinwall, flourishing the sugar-tongs, “you’ll be well instanter. This beverage is guaranteed to cure aching heads or hearts, stomach faintness or faint-heartedness, dyspepsia, or the blues. So drink and be happy.”

“Oh!” cried Laura, in a burst, as she gulped down the steaming liquid, “I wish I could be, so easily.”

Miss Aspinwall sat down beside her. “Poor little girl! Are things so bad?”

Her tenderness made Laura choke dismally. Miss Aspinwall, who had her own suspicions, stroked the bowed head, internally speculating if she had better verify them.

“Now, chicken,” she began, presently, “I’m not going to ask any questions. You just lie here and be as comfy as you can, and don’t be thinking too hard. Unless,—I’ll tell you what,—you can spend your thoughts on me.” She smiled mischievously. “Laura, I’m going to impart a tremendous secret. You are not

even to tell your mother till I give you permission. The Aspinwall family is shortly to become extinct. It has decided that its present solitary state might soon lead to bankruptcy. Therefore, it is going to join forces with another party, and the name,—well, the name will be Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Dinsmore."

"Oh, Aunt Harriet!" Miss Aspinwall's face, with its bewitching flush, disappeared in Laura's energetic hug. "How perfectly lovely! And isn't he a lucky man!" The extreme conviction expressed in the words almost sent Miss Aspinwall into hysterics.

"You shall say that to Tom in exactly that tone. Sometimes outside testimony counts for much."

"He doesn't need it at all," cried Laura. "Everybody can see he thinks you're the loveliest woman in the world. You'll be very happy," she added, with quick wistfulness. "It's nice to have somebody happy."

"At your age," Miss Aspinwall was looking straight ahead, but she slipped her

hand into Laura's as she spoke, "I was more unhappy than you can probably conceive of. Did you ever hear how I escaped from my mother and her matrimonial plans? No? Well,—it isn't a cheerful story, but it won't take long to tell. When I was eighteen mother took me to Paris for my first season. There, it was soon known that the property, which was entirely mother's while she lived, would be unreservedly mine at her death. Forthwith, of course, appeared the usual number of chivalrous gentlemen anxious to give me the protection of their ancient and impecunious names. One of these had a longer and older patronymic than all the rest together. Three centuries before it really had stood for something in the civilisation of the world. The glamour of the past that enveloped its syllables, and a very adroit method of flattery on the part of its present owner, settled the thing in my mother's mind. Monsieur le Duc, however destitute of money, morals, or brains, was maternally accepted for my husband. I had abso-

lutely no voice in the matter. Tears and pleadings were as useless as furious refusals. My rebellious state only hurried the matter on. Monsieur le Duc and Madame la Mère both would feel safer after the ceremony. So, instead of having the groom come to America, we were to be irretrievably bound in Paris before we sailed."

Even after fifteen years she could not keep out of her voice the vibrant passion that was a memento of that time. Laura, who had been leaning forward with a white, intense face, shivered at that last sentence.

"What — what did you do?" she whispered.

Miss Aspinwall laughed shortly, and swept the girl's face with a swift, penetrating glance. "Do? I didn't do anything at first. Just moaned and groaned and trembled like any other young fool. Then one day it came over me with a realisation I had never had before that in less than ten days I would be the wife of that brute. Somehow, the Lord only

knows how, all my weakness and cringing fear were gone. Since there was no one else to help me, I would help myself. And I made my plans just as if I'd always been engaged in that practice. I got permission to visit a girl friend out beyond Fontainebleau. My maid, who was once my nurse, was dispatched with me, and the powers that were concluded I was beginning to regain my senses. Well,— it didn't need any persuading on my part to induce Connor to agree to all my plans. She had as sincere a hatred for the Duc as I had. We simply didn't go to the friend's at all. We went to Havre, and took a steamer that was leaving for New York the very next day. And before it was discovered that I had disappeared from France, we were more than half-way across the ocean." She stopped abruptly and shook her head at Laura's strained expression. "I guess such stories are not the best medicine for headaches," she said, remorsefully. "Don't look so wretched, goosie. You see it all came out well, after all."

"But — your mother — what did she do? What happened when you got here?"

Her excited, breathless state sent a chill over Miss Aspinwall. "The Lord forgive me if I'm making mischief," she breathed, silently.

"Before I left Havre," she said, quietly, "I cabled Aunt Harmon to meet me. She knew of the contemplated match and of my feelings. The dear old lady was wholly on my side, and received me with open arms. There was a cable from my mother awaiting me, saying that if I didn't take the next steamer back I need never consider myself her daughter again."

Laura gasped, and turned so deadly white that Miss Aspinwall sprang up in consternation, with a malediction upon her own stupidity. But the girl recovered herself at once.

"It isn't anything," she insisted, "I was just a little faint. Please, please, Aunt Harriet, finish it for me."

"I feel like Scheherazade," said the

story-teller, grimly. “There isn’t much more to finish. Naturally I wouldn’t go back. Aunt Harmon was glad to give me a home with her. Very soon I began to study painting. As for my mother,” — she got up and put away the tea-caddy, — “I never saw her again till a few days before she died, in Paris, about seven years ago.”

The pause that followed was unbroken, till Miss Aspinwall surreptitiously glancing at the slight figure lying so still among the cushions, once more sat down beside her.

“It all seems dreadful to you, Pussie, doesn’t it?” she said, lightly, “but you must remember that there is as much difference in mothers as there is in — aunts, for instance! And then, my dear, if I hadn’t refused to be sold in those callow days, I never could have come into the happiness of these ancient ones.”

Laura gazed with fascinated, troubled eyes at the tender love-light shining on the older woman’s face, and then, with a

smothered cry, she threw herself into her arms.

"Oh!" she sobbed, "I wasn't blaming you. I was only admiring. *You* were brave and true, and deserve all, everything."

Miss Aspinwall held her close, wondering what in the world was best to say. In the midst of her perplexity, Laura slipped from her arms and began to pull on her coat.

"I'm going home, Aunt Harriet. It's foolish to make such a fuss over a headache," she said to Miss Aspinwall's surprised expostulation. There was only great weariness in her voice. All the tense excitement was gone, and she was once more the calmly reserved, quiet Laura Lorraine.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE night before “Jack’s day” was also the next to the last at the opera, with a star cast in “The Magic Flute.” It was a great favourite with Laura, and she would usually have rebelled at any engagement that kept her from it. To-night she let her mother go without her, saying only that she had a headache and didn’t want to hear any music. It was the first time that Mrs. Lorraine fully realised how wan the child was, how heavy and dimmed her eyes. Through all the first act she could see nothing but this piteous face, and every minute her accusing conscience made her own discomfort grow. Miss Aspinwall’s arrival, before the second act, came as a thankful release from her disconcerting thoughts. The artist, however, was not there to make things easier.

"Helen," she began, without preamble, "what's the matter with Laura?"

"I'm sure I don't know." Mrs. Lorraine's evident irritation was not the best proof of her alleged ignorance. "She hasn't complained of being sick."

"Complained," sniffed the other. "Sick! No,—I don't suppose she has, or is, for that matter. But she looks like a twenty-year ghost. I met her wandering among the goats in the back alleys of Harlem the other day. She might have been the walking prototype of the Lost Hope. If I didn't suppose I knew better I should say she was a victim of some wildly unhappy love affair. But that certainly doesn't seem exactly in the region of Laura's possibilities."

"Well, no, not precisely," said her mother, dryly.

"All the same, it's just as well not to rely too strongly upon the supposed callousness of such placid natures. In my opinion, that calm daughter of yours is somehow in a very whirlpool of trouble and fear. If she belonged to me," Miss

Aspinwall looked with steady emphasis straight into her friend's eyes, "I should be very much afraid that if the trouble was not lessened she would do something desperate."

The orchestra began again, and the painter, who went to the opera for the sake of the music, dropped all further conversation.

Her words, however, had accomplished more than she could have suspected. Added to Mrs. Lorraine's vivid memory of Laura's face that evening, they completed her total discomfort. There was no doubt about it. The child certainly had a perfect horror of the marriage with Sir Robert. And she didn't show any signs of getting over it. Perhaps there was even danger that she might, as Harriet suggested, grow desperate. Heavens! How abominably different it all was from what she had hoped! She had tried to plan for Laura's greatest happiness, and she was apparently driving her into misery. Almost anything was better than such a consciousness. That would be a

much worse failure than to give up the whole thing, even at this late day. Besides, who knew? Perhaps, if she didn't force her now, Laura might by and by think of Sir Robert more favourably. That was surely not uncharacteristic of girl nature. In any case, there was no use, she couldn't stand it if Laura continued to look as she did now. Why, before long, all the world would be saying Mrs. Lorraine had sold her daughter. The thought was intolerable. There was no more indecision in her mind. She would tell Laura that very night that she need never marry the baronet. Having reached this point, sitting there doing nothing when Laura was probably suffering torments at home, became unbearable. Before Miss Aspinwall noticed that she had gone, she was in her carriage, driving rapidly home.

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“But I don't understand.”

Mrs. Lorraine stopped in surprise at the top of her first flight. That was cer-

tainly Jack's voice from behind the portières of the Indian room. Before she could turn to enter, something that sounded strangely like a sob followed the words. Instinctively she listened, too startled to be sure where it came from.

"It's only what I have been telling you for nearly three weeks."

There was no doubt now. That utterly hopeless, broken voice was Laura's. It affected her mother curiously. She hardly knew whether to break in upon the two, or to wait till Jack had gone. There was something in the air, so to speak, that made her feel strangely unquiet. While she hesitated, with her hand actually on the portière. Jack spoke again.

"But it can't be true, Laura! Sweetheart! Don't look like that."

Mrs. Lorraine clutched the drapery till it swayed with her weight. Inside the two young voices went on, and now the listener was half crouched on the floor, her ears strained not to miss a word. For the roaring in her head and the queer

dancing lights before her eyes made it very hard to hear at all.

“Oh, but, Jack, my own dear Jack, there’s no help for it. I’ve got to marry Sir Robert.”

“Stuff and nonsense!” Apparently he had bounced to his feet and was stamping about excitedly. “Why, it’s the most ridiculous thing I ever heard of. You don’t *have* to marry anybody but me. Aren’t you of age? Nobody can force you.”

Then, after a pause, the crouching, listening woman heard a quick step and then a rustle. And she knew as well as if she saw that the big fellow had stooped and gathered the girl into his arms. And she knew, too, that no Inquisition had ever torn one’s heart with such an agony of torture.

“Dear!” — She had dreamed of a tenderness like that! — “Don’t despair. After all, the trouble is much of our own making. Have you ever given your mother a single hint that you loved me?”

“Why, you know I haven’t. I told

you long ago that she would never let me marry you."

"Yes, but I never could see why, when she was so nice to me."

"Oh, I know! You thought we ought to tell her. But she had changed so suddenly! I wanted to be perfectly sure that she really did like you. It was all so extraordinary — the way she treated you, that I couldn't believe in it. I — oh, I was scared all the time. You knew it. You knew that was why I almost never saw you except as we met out walking."

"I felt then we were making a mistake. Now I wish I had gone to her much earlier than I did."

"What good would it have done? What good did it do? Right after she gave you every reason to hope she might be good to us, she began talking Sir Robert to me." There was no vindictiveness in her tones, — only abject misery.

"Poor little sweetheart!" Again that depth of tenderness! "I know. But if you had told her then just how it was, how it was nothing we had planned. How

we had begun somehow, without thinking much about it, to meet when you were out walking. And how suddenly we had found out what was in my heart even at the Oakes. Dearest, then, then, I am sure things must have been different by now."

"Different!" Helen Lorraine wondered how long one could endure such pain. Different, indeed! If that wild, incredible hope of hers had not had those three weeks to feed upon and grow so strong and lusty, surely it could have come to its death much easier.

"Jack! dear Jack! You don't know mother as well as I do. If she meant to let us come together, why did she never even mention you to me after your talk with her? Oh, I don't understand why she gave you such encouragement. Perhaps you misunderstood."

Misunderstood! Ah! she hadn't thought of the humiliation before. What a blind fool she had been that night and ever since!

"Why," went on Jack, — she lost the

first of his reply, — “she told me almost literally that in three weeks she would give me my heart’s desire. My heart’s desire!”

Again that soft silence — worse than all the stabbing words.

“Well” — it was Laura’s voice — “it is all beyond my understanding. Only, almost from the beginning I have known mother would not want me to marry you. And she never changes her mind. She never nagged like some girls’ mothers, but all my life I’ve known that any wish or suggestion of hers was as binding as an absolute command. But she always planned for my good. Always — always, and even now she thinks she is doing the best thing for me.”

“But that’s just it. Of course she thinks so. And when we show her definitely that it isn’t, — why, it’s absurd to suppose she’ll insist upon that hateful marriage. She couldn’t do that and be the mother she is. The very thought of such a thing is an insult to that glorious, beautiful woman.”

"Glorious, beautiful!" Ah! at least, it had not all been pretence. He did admire and like her. Perhaps it made the pain worse, but she was unspeakably glad he was not a hypocrite.

"Now, Laura, love," he was continuing, and the woman behind the curtain stopped thinking to listen, "to-morrow you and I go together and tell her plainly what we are to each other. And unless I don't know her at all, she is going to say, 'Bless you, my children,' with all her heart."

"Oh, Jack! I don't dare, I don't dare. Just as sure as you do, everything is over. I shall have to marry Sir Robert right off. Oh, you don't know her as I do. She is lovely,—everything you say,—but nobody ever goes against her will. Jack! Jack! If you love me, don't do that. It would mean to lose you for ever,—and I can't bear it, Jack." She broke down completely, weeping bitterly.

So that was the kind of woman her own daughter thought her! Could she deserve that too? Was there to be no end

to her disgrace? Oh, but thank Heaven! Jack did not agree with her!

"But, Laura, what shall we do? Things can't go on this way much longer. I am to see Mrs. Lorraine to-morrow, anyhow. What am I to tell her?"

"Oh, I don't know. But if we tell her, we lose each other for ever."

"Dearest! You are all unstrung. Think how impossible that is! Even supposing she was the monster you think, that couldn't be true. Why—if things were so bad, I'd pick you up in my arms and lug you off, whether or no, before the face of the whole world." And he actually laughed at his cowering sweetheart.

The listening woman clenched her hands. How the words conveyed the picture to her mind! She could almost see that backward throw of his head as he said them.

Laura's sobs had stopped. "Do you mean that?"

The low, husky intentness somehow sent a shiver through the woman outside.

"Mean it? Do you suppose if that was the only way to get you, I would hesitate? I might never have tried to win you if I hadn't believed your mother was willing. But once sure of your love—" his voice broke, and then went on very low. "Heaven knows I don't deserve that love. But at least I am not poltroon enough to lose it once it has become mine."

Again that long, vibrating silence! Would they never go on? Anything was better than this.

It was Laura who spoke next, at first so softly that some of her words failed to reach her mother's ears.

"You will think—I am horrid. But,—unless you want to give me up,—I've thought and thought without—never give her consent. And I know—shall have to give in. There's only one way. You must tell her afterwards. Marry me first."

"Laura!" The astonishment in Jack's voice answered to the horror that swept into Helen Lorraine's heart.

"Oh, isn't it dreadful that I should suggest such a thing to you! But see! I know mother — but I know myself still better. If I am not absolutely bound to you by law, I know I shall give in to her — and marry Sir Robert."

"My poor little sweetheart! And it is I who have put you into such a strait as this!"

"Oh, no no!" The one outside did not have to see the way she clung to him. "But I love you so! I can't lose you!"

"And you're certainly not going to. Do you think I am to have no say to all this? If you agree forty times to marry Sir Robert, that's nothing to me. You have promised to be my wife first, — and we love each other. I'll kidnap you with pleasure — as a last resort. But first I go to a beautiful woman and ask her fairly for her daughter. And don't you worry, sweetheart. It's your mother who will set our wedding-day."

Afterwards Helen Lorraine thought she must have lost consciousness for a few minutes. The sudden breaking of that

last tension had been too much for her overstrained nerves. The next thing she heard was Jack saying, cheerfully, "It's awfully late, and you ought to be abed. I'm going this minute."

Hardly knowing what she was doing, she had sense enough to get away. It must have been hours later when she came to herself sufficiently to realise that she was lying on the couch in her own room dressed just as she had come from the opera.

CHAPTER XV.

ONE, two, three, four, rang out the silver chimes in the hall. And Jack was due at half-past. For a minute Helen Lorraine stopped in her aimless walk about the drawing-room. Would Laura come with him? She hadn't seen her all day. Ever since breakfast, which she had taken at an abnormally early hour, she had given her horses no rest. Up and down Broadway, in and out of Twenty-third Street, stopping at one store after another and then returning to the first, she had kept them at a feverish gait. James, who had driven Mrs. Lorraine since the first year of her married life, shook his head at the footman when that youth muttered something about "She'd need a Jack-in-the-box to be ready to help her out."

"The missis," said James, sententiously, "do be havin' somethin' on her

mind. I hiven't seen the luke av her face since the firrrst years she was marryied. When the likes av her have such a luke in their big eyes, 'tis I praise the saints me airly thrainin's toughened me own hide! 'Tis throuble, me bye. And if she can tak' a bit av it out av me an' the craythers, 'taint you need be objectin'."

Strangely enough, Helen had almost grown unconscious of any acute suffering. Instead, she felt benumbed, both mentally and physically. Along with this sensation of leaden weight she had a dread that, unless she kept moving, she would soon lose all power of locomotion. There was, however, one corner of her brain evidently still active. For over and over it kept repeating, "What are you going to do? Will you see Jack? Alone? Or with Laura?" No answer was ever forthcoming, and she had a vague hope that, if she could only walk fast enough and keep busy enough, they would by and by cease altogether. But at three o'clock they were still whirling as dizzily as ever. With a faint perception that horses and

servants needed food, she abandoned her pilgrimage from store to store and gave the homeward order.

And now, Jack would be here. Certainly she could not meet him this way. She had got to decide upon something. Was there nothing to keep that rolling brain still long enough to answer its own questions? With a desperate longing for help, she turned swiftly and found herself facing the tall mirror at the far end of the room. Slowly she walked toward it with eyes widening at every step. Was that what one night had done? Could such lines come in a few hours? That drawn, pinched, chalky face, with the eyes that looked like live coals, Helen Lorraine? And that dreadful stoop of the shoulders! Little by little, as she studied her duplicate, a growing horror took the place of the monotonous, never-ending questions. If that was the way she appeared, there was no need for her to wonder what she should say to Jack. He would read the whole story, without any words from her.

No one, not even Laura, could misinterpret such a face as that.

"Mr. Wilton," announced the butler at the door behind her.

The woman at the mirror looked wildly about for a chance to escape. It was too late. He was already by the window, and must have seen her as he entered. And then, suddenly, the ghastly white of her face was mostly gone. The lines were smoothed nearly to obliteration and she was, to casual inspection, very much her usual contained self. It was partly, doubtless, the automatic reply of her long disciplined nature to any demands made upon it by society. But it was more than that. As the queer numbness that had bowed her down all day gradually wore off in the terror at the mirror's revelation, there came in its place the acute realisation of what it all meant. And the agony of this brought the power to hide its ravages.

"You are prompt, Sir Knight." It would have taken keener and more experienced ears than Jack's to detect any

minor note in the gay greeting. After all, he had not noticed, and she had a chance to see his expression before he knew she was near. It at once put her still more on guard. There was trouble in it, but there was a sort of suppressed fear, too, and into her mind flashed a wonder if perhaps, at last, he had begun to suspect.

"I wish I could have been even prompter," he said, as he shook hands.

"Yes, I know. And I wouldn't let you." She led the way over to the sofa. "But there really was no hurry, and a little lesson in patience wasn't the worse discipline for you."

"The same charming, interesting, wonderfully congenial woman he had known for so many weeks," thought Jack. Unconsciously he heaved a sigh of relief. Mrs. Lorraine smiled at the way the sigh hurt her.

"Now, then, my dear boy," she placed herself back to the light, "what is the question you want me to say 'yes' to?" "Harriet was right," she was saying to

herself. “Modern society had ways of teaching calm indifference that the old Spartans never imagined.”

“Then you *don’t* know? What a fool I was not to tell you plainly! And yet,—I was so sure you understood!” His words tumbled over one another in mingled distress and self-reproach.

And Mrs. Lorraine smiled again. How young he was!

“I thought at first I did understand. Lately I’ve thought I didn’t. You—you weren’t asking me to let you build my Lenox place?” With her face in the shade, she dared look squarely at him.

“Build your Lenox place?” He stared at her with unutterable astonishment. She thanked Heaven there was as yet no hint of incredulity beside.

“We were talking of your future, you know,” she went on, quickly but evenly, “and you had been so delighted about the Tabor house,—and you knew I was thinking of rebuilding at Lenox.”

“But, Mrs. Lorraine! To *ask* you for the work!”

" You mean it was too much to ask? Why, then," apparently much relieved, " then I've guessed wrong again. I was afraid you were going to demand much more than that."

But he was ready for her. " That's just it. A million times more." He stood up, tall and straight, before her. " I don't think I have been quite fair, Mrs. Lorraine. I don't know if you have guessed. It is our fault if you haven't. Three weeks ago I was sure you did know, but—" He crimsoned furiously as he looked away.

It took all her training to keep her own face impassive. She did not even attempt to speak.

" But evidently you didn't," he continued, still not looking at her. " And — we — I am to blame. We have hardly seen each other in society at all. We — I — " he once more faced her fully, and his voice was steady — " I love Laura, Mrs. Lorraine, with all my heart. I ought to have told you long ago, for we have been

meeting each other very often — and — she loves me."

It couldn't be harder than she had expected, she assured herself, bitterly. But as she looked at the clear, strong face that pleaded mutely, she almost broke. A wild longing came upon her to test him, to win for herself by whatever means some of that love-light in his eyes. Desperately she fought the impulse while she groped for harmless words.

" You were not — exactly — frank." There was no hint of struggle in her voice, but she had unconsciously bent out of the shadow. It was only for a minute, but it was long enough for Jack to see her eyes. Afterwards, he told himself sternly that he had dreamed he saw the agony within them. He had not stopped to reason when, with a strange pressure in his throat, he dropped on his knee beside her, and took her hand between both of his.

" Dear Mrs. Lorraine." Her face was back in the shadow now, but for very fear he did not lift his lids. " Dear Mrs.

Lorraine," he whispered again, and held the hand close to his cheek.

And though she knew too well the risk she ran, for a little Helen Lorraine could only sit there speechless. Then, slowly, she lifted her other hand till it rested on his dark hair. "You have been," she began, painfully, when with a cry of "Mother!" the hall portières were torn apart, and Laura rushed headlong into the room.

"Thank Heaven!" Her mother almost said it aloud, as she sank back weak from the sudden lifting of the strain.

Jack was on his feet and half-way over to Laura before she perceived that he was there.

"Oh, Jack!" she cried, despairingly, "then I'm too late." His strange look frightened her with its possible meaning.

"We were both late," he said, unevenly, pulling himself together with an effort, "but now, I think you are just in time." He did not need to look toward the sofa. Laura had left him before he finished.

“Mother!” She threw herself before her. “Did he tell you? Did he tell you how I wanted to run away and marry him before you knew at all? Oh, I don’t deserve to be forgiven.” She clasped her arms about her mother, while she went on, pantingly, “But you don’t know, oh, mother, you don’t know what it is to love him with all your heart and soul, and to be afraid you can never be his wife.”

“Ah!” Helen Lorraine stifled the cry that sprang to her trembling lips. Clasping the girl close to her heart, she whispered, brokenly, “I am the one to be forgiven. But I’ll try to make it up to you now, dear. Jack,” she called, softly.

And Jack, who was standing by the window, seeing nothing for the blur before him, turned to take his sweetheart from her mother’s hands.



THE WALDORF - ASTORIA

CHAPTER XVI.

HE corridors and parlours of the Waldorf-Astoria were in a more than usually kaleidoscopic condition. There was to be a big meeting of the directors and managers of one of the great trust-corporations. And the magnates had brought themselves and their wives to the house generally regarded in the West as being the only hotel in the metropolis. Some of these delegates had but recently gained their managerial positions, and it was mostly they whose wives were along. And the wives wore all their recently acquired diamonds and new imported "model" gowns of lace and crêpe and chiffon. But they were not alone in the taste that trailed such fête, dinner, and reception "creations" from midday to midnight through the public rooms. In the promenades of this great house one might fancy himself back in the seventies,

when the streets, the cars, and the hotels were always full of these bejewelled, beruffled, and gaudily overbedecked American women.

Besides the legitimate guests and outside sightseers that throng the Waldorf, there are always never-ending streams of resident New Yorkers. The side-shows, so to speak, are one of the reasons for their presence. This morning the chief of these irregular attractions was a short, wheezy, needle-eyed Persian, with ingratiating manner, and a collection of Eastern rugs and embroideries. Somehow he and his wares had won society's attention. Society, therefore, sedulously swarmed into his crowded, incense-perfumed rooms, and as the rooms grew empty, his pockets bulged the fatter, and his greasy smile waxed the wider and more deprecating.

Aunt Harmon hated all Easterners. Besides, to her, who had spent the large part of her life in that Philadelphian or Bostonese New York, Washington Square, the degeneracy that had come to the whole city was never more flamboyantly in

evidence than within this palace-hotel. Nevertheless, she had heard of some rare old embroideries exhibited there by the Persian. And for embroideries Aunt Harmon would almost have bartered her great-grandfather's white-pillared mansion on the square. She had persuaded Miss Aspinwall to go with her, and for two hours the old lady had secretly gloated over and outwardly scorned the treasures she had captured from the envious hands of her fellow connoisseurs.

It was while she was good-naturedly guying her relative at the huge pile she was accumulating, that Miss Aspinwall suddenly thought of Helen Lorraine. She hadn't seen her since the night at the opera when she left so early. Nor Laura, either, she reflected, with some surprise. She considered further that it was about time she told Helen of the important agreement between herself and Tom. She was feeling inordinately proud of that young man just now. It was really necessary to confide in some one. Otherwise, from the lack of being able to thin

it out judiciously, she would be giving him altogether too thick a spreading of her satisfaction.

"Well, Harriet Aspinwall," drawled the well-known voice at this moment behind her, "haven't you enough of such stuff without filling that heathen's pockets with any more good American money?"

"It's not I," said Harriet, shaking hands, elaborately, "it's Aunt Harmon and her everlasting embroideries. I'm sure I don't know what she'll do in heaven without 'em. It isn't having them so much, or leaving them behind, but she'll be miserable if she ever gets where she can't buy more." Miss Aspinwall was talking to gain time. The first sight of her friend had very nearly betrayed her into an exclamation. For while most people might have considered Mrs. Lorraine merely a trifle pale and heavy-eyed, what Miss Aspinwall saw she would not stop to think about.

"I was just going to telephone you to take luncheon with me," she went on, carelessly. "Now that you are here, let's

get away from this rabble if we can. I want to talk."

"It's a beautiful place for conversation," said Mrs. Lorraine, languidly.

"Nowhere better. It's safer to shout secrets in a crowd than to whisper them in a windowless, doorless, and empty cellar. But there was no one in the Turkish room a few minutes ago. I'll tell Aunt Harmon to look for us there if she ever drags herself away from these rags."

Once installed in a semi-quiet corner where the window draperies partly screened them from observation, Miss Aspinwall wasted no time.

"Have you heard the news about Tom Dinsmore?" she asked, with extreme nonchalance.

Mrs. Lorraine looked up in relieved surprise. She had dreaded something different. "News? No. Have you finally driven him to succumb to the assiduous attentions of Flora Eastlake?"

"He's found other attractions more alluring. He's gone into city politics."

"And I suppose you're responsible. Your hard-heartedness would have driven some men to drink instead."

"You are complimentary, but I'm obliged to deny the insinuation. I'd nothing to do with his reformation. Judge Emery got him to take that little Frenchman's case, and that was the beginning of the end. Before he knew it, he was fairly wallowing in the mud where grow our most excellent officials. And now he's boozing Judge Emery for district attorney, and organising anti-clubs, and Heaven knows what. As that elegant sheet, the *Penny*, remarked, 'He's in it with both patent leathers, and refuses to slip out and leave them behind.'" She finished with an excited laugh that made Mrs. Lorraine look at her with suspicion.

"Well," remarked the young widow, sternly, "what are you proposing to do? You can talk Judge Emery all you like, but you certainly know he's adopted dirty politics simply for you. If he gets a bullet through him down in those Tam-

many camps I hope you'll realise your responsibility."

Miss Aspinwall dropped her eyes demurely. "You are as bad an exaggerator as he is himself. I'm not responsible for the soul or body of any man. And I never will be. Not even after we've gone through that kindergarten ceremony that's supposed to act like a mutual apron-string for all the rest of our mortal lives."

"No! Really? Harriet!" In spite of her half preparation, Mrs. Lorraine was too astonished for connected speech.

"Yes! Really! Helen!" mimicked the owner of the news. "But you needn't sow it broadcast yet. It — it's rather an unusual experience for me. I'm not going to throw it to Mother Grundy and her clacking chickens till I'm morally sure I can stand being picked to my very skin without so much as turning a feather. But you —" the mocking raillery suddenly slipped out of hearing — "you might as well wish me good luck now, you know. I — I — can't somehow get used to being happy."

Helen's hand reached out for her friend's. "I wish you all the world. I'm so glad, Harriet. It — it's a great comfort to know that happiness isn't always only for children." She was looking far past Miss Aspinwall with an expression that made the artist's eyes suddenly swim.

"*We* were neither of us very happy when we were hardly out of our childhood," she answered low.

Mrs. Lorraine got up quickly, and went over to the window. "Thank Heaven, one of us has something to take the taste of those days away. And I —" there was a long pause before she went on quietly — "I am to have a vicarious chance to forget, too — in seeing Laura happy. That isn't out, either, yet, but she has accepted Jack Wilton."

"Jack Wilton! Laura!" It was Harriet's turn to be astonished. At first she could only stare at Helen, standing still and rigid at the window. Then, gradually, her vague memories and half surmises of the early winter came back to

her. “And you — agree? I thought — where’s Sir Robert?”

“Coming to town again to-morrow. And I’ve got to make explanations. It isn’t a pleasant prospect.” Still gazing steadily out of the window.

Miss Aspinwall went up to her, and gently touched her arm. “Helen,” she said, very softly. But Helen did not turn. With a curious dread Miss Aspinwall glanced at the door as if she contemplated flight. “Helen, dear.”

The tall, regal figure turned at last, swiftly. “Well?” She looked defiantly at the questioning face. “You know what I had planned. I believe you say I never get defeated. Or if I do, that no one ever knows it. I must be getting old, I think. For, I do not care — I don’t care at all, Harriet, that you know how badly I have been vanquished.” There was no defiance now. Only the same pleading agony that for a minute Jack had seen.

“You don’t need to care.” It was all that Harriet could answer. With a quick

gesture, she took Helen's two hands and held them close within her own. But to herself she was saying, "She mustn't talk. She will never forgive herself afterwards."

"It is awfully hard." She got the words out desperately. "And I don't wonder you're a wreck and hate to see Sir Robert. But — he is a little old, you know, for Laura. The boy is — a better age for her. And — how she must adore you!" She finished with a rush while her eyes and hands dumbly begged pardon for her lips.

Slowly, as she spoke, a dull red flame swept over Helen's gray face. Then she gently loosed her hands and turned to the window. "Yes," she said, "he is a much better age for Laura. And she does" — there was a little catch in her voice — "she does adore her mother."

"Oh, here you are!" called Aunt Harmon, in triumph. "I'm ready to go, Harriet, whenever you are. He didn't have much, that man, but I've got a few pieces. I met Laura and young Mr. Wil-

ton this morning," she said, genially, to Mrs. Lorraine. "I've quite often met them this winter, and he's always very polite. Really, if I were you, Helen, I'd encourage him. Madame d'Honneur was saying only the other day that he has the good manners of fifty years ago. And as she says, there aren't many of that kind left now."

CHAPTER XVII.

SIR ROBERT MARTIN-MAS was waiting in her drawing-room for Mrs. Lorraine. She had, of course, at once written him of Laura's engagement. The note implied that there was no further object for his contemplated call. Nevertheless, the baronet had called, several times, without finding Mrs. Lorraine at home. Finally he wrote, begging her to set an hour to see him. It was not, as she told Miss Aspinwall, an occasion to be awaited with joy. She had devoutly hoped that something would remove the young man to the other hemisphere before it happened. She confessed to herself, however, as she shook hands cordially, that she would be sorry never to have a chance to see him again. There was something so big and strong and wholesome about him; it did one good just to shake hands and feel his firm

grip. He was not one to deal in subtleties, and she was thankful that for once she could be sure of simple candour unhampered by any underlying meanings.

“ You were very kind to write me so promptly of Miss Lorraine’s engagement,” he started in, almost immediately. “ It did spoil a certain plan of mine, but I’ve been completely at sea to guess how you knew it.”

“ Why,” Mrs. Lorraine was slightly disconcerted, “ why, you told me yourself. Or, at least,” she flushed ever so slightly, “ gave me to understand that the disposal of Laura’s future meant much to you.”

“ Of course, after what you told me. But I can’t see how you guessed about my brother.”

“ About your brother!” Her amazement left no room for any other feeling. Here were subtleties enough, after all. “ What has your brother to do with it?”

“ Then you didn’t know! But I can’t understand — ” the baronet was equally perplexed. “ I say, Mrs. Lorraine, the

best way is to straighten this out from the beginning. Do you remember telling me that your chief object in life was to have your daughter happily married? So much so that nothing else counted? That you would think of no future, nothing, for yourself, till that was accomplished?"

She nodded, with increased colour.

"Well, you know, I thought of my brother Clarence. You've never seen him, I think. But it happened that he met Miss Lorraine in London just before you sailed. And the boy quite raved about her, boy style, you know. But he's a fine fellow, and — er — has — is better off than I am. When you spoke as you did, I thought of him at once. He answered by return mail that Miss Lorraine was quite the most charming girl he'd met, and he wasn't at all in love with anybody else, and if it would help me out — why, he'd come over and try for her with pleasure. As soon as I heard from him I wrote you." He stopped, somewhat out of breath, and looked at his hostess inquiringly.

She had listened with increasing nervousness, but ever growing amusement. The calmness with which he had planned to settle her difficulties and Laura's future tickled her immensely. At the same time she began to fear what might be his reason for it all.

"You were more than kind," she said, rather lamely. "If Laura had only waited for our plans —"

"She couldn't, I'm sure, from what I've heard and seen of Mr. Wilton, have chosen a finer fellow," put in the baronet, cordially. "And, after all, it doesn't really matter to us." His delicate emphasis upon the pronoun sent a chill over his listener. "You are now free to do as you like." He stood up, his face rather red and embarrassed, but shining with a very real earnestness. Mrs. Lorraine lifted her hand deprecatingly, but he paid no attention. "I don't know how to say it to make you best understand what it means to me. I have never said it to a woman before. But I love and admire

you beyond all women, and I beg you to be my wife."

Before he had finished, her head had dropped into her hands.

Sir Robert looked at her, hesitatingly, a moment, and then he bent low over her, "Will you,—Helen?"

Slowly she lifted her face to his, and in its exceeding sorrow he read her answer.

He drew himself up sharply while the embarrassed red and the eagerness fled from his countenance. Such silent acceptance of his fate went to her heart more keenly than many words. Impulsively she sprang to her feet.

"See!" she cried, passionately. "I could find it in my heart to mourn more than you can. At this moment, it seems to me beyond all things hard that I cannot love you. You whom I respect, like, admire almost more than any man I ever met." Her voice broke piteously, and the man turned with quick lighted fire.

"If you like me as well as that, what else matters? I'll be content and grate-

ful. And you shall never be sorry you were my wife.” He raised her hand to his lips with a world of homage in his eyes.

“ Oh, but you don’t understand! I should be sorry all my life. For — for, Sir Robert, respect and admiration and liking are not all I could give a man.” Her voice had sunk to a whisper, and she stood before him with drooped head and hanging, helpless hands.

He drew in his breath painfully. “ You — you love some one else?”

“ I love some one — as you love me — and as hopelessly.”

For a few moments there was not a sound. Then the man, out of his own great love, longed most of all to find words to comfort her.

“ If — if,” he leaned toward her, a rare light shining through the pallor on his face, “ if I might help you! You have done so much for me! I never knew the heights till you showed me them. All my life I shall be glad that I have learned to know what love can be.”

Her eyes were full as she held out both hands. “It is the right word,” she whispered, “one can be glad if one has even touched the heights.”

THE END.

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